

THE
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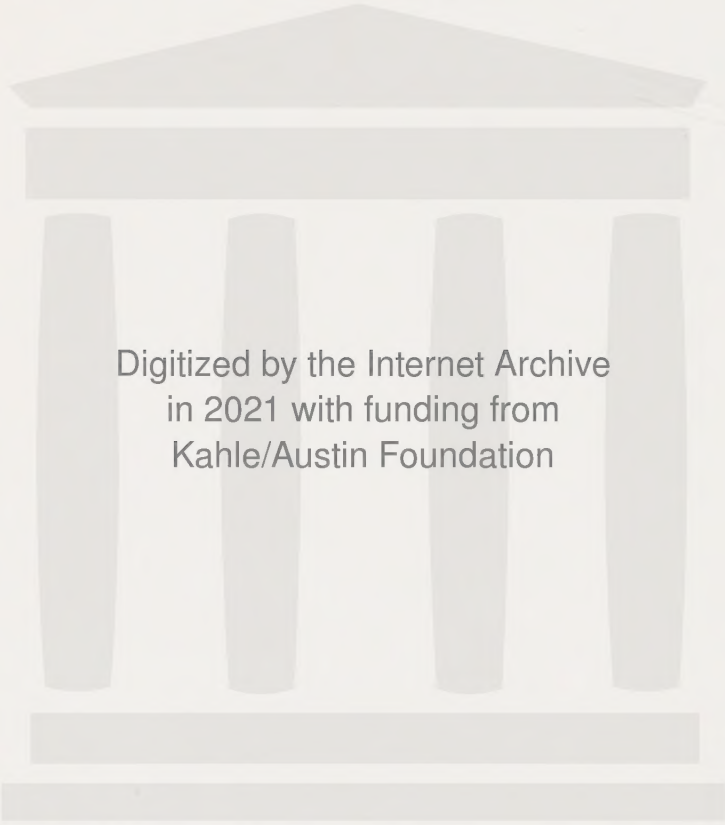
THE
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Revised and
Expanded

ROCCO A. ERRICO



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LET THERE BE LIGHT

The Seven Keys

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Setting A Trap for God: The Aramaic Prayer of Jesus

Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys

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Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew

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LET THERE BE LIGHT
The Seven Keys

Rocco A. Errico

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In gratitude
to
Mrs. Katherine W. Procter

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I also wish to express my thanks to Rev. Ann D. Milbourn, Ms. Nell Clement, Ms. Linetta Izenman, and to all the members of the Noohra Foundation whose continual support has made this work possible.

NOTE: The ancient Aramaic symbol which appears on the title page of this book is a scribal abbreviation of the name of God: "Yah" for "Yahweh." Near Eastern Assyrian Christian scribes usually placed the "Yah" at the beginning of a holy book and on the first page of a sacred writing or manuscript.

ABBREVIATIONS

TANAKH — OLD TESTAMENT

Gen.	Genesis
Ex.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Nu.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy

Josh.	Joshua
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Ki.	1 Kings
2 Ki.	2 Kings
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles

Job	The book of Job
Ps.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Song of Sol.	Song of Solomon
Ecc.	Ecclesiastes

Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Ezk.	Ezekiel

NEW TESTAMENT

Mt.	Matthew
Mk.	Mark
Lk.	Luke
Jn.	John

Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
1 Thes.	1 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy

1 Jn.	1 John
Rev.	Revelation

B.C.E.	Before the Common Era (B.C.)
C.E.	Common Era (A.D.)

Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition

It has been nine years since the publication of my book *Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys*. I have been very encouraged by the many letters and personal calls received over the years from people throughout the United States and Canada. They have told me how much more meaningful the Bible has become for them since reading *The Seven Keys*.

At that same time, my readers had more questions to ask about specific biblical passages. All my books that followed *Let There Be Light* attempted to answer those inquiries. Other readers offered helpful suggestions on what more they would like to read in an updated edition of my book on the Keys.

I believe the time has come to reply to my readers and offer an edition that contains some matters they want to see in an updated book. For instance, they wanted to know about humor. Does the Bible contain comedy? If so, where are these passages? (See p. 116.) There were also particular inquiries about the Resurrection of Jesus. (See p. 219.) And, of course, they wanted to know more about Near Eastern customs.

Keeping the same style as the original edition, I have added nearly one hundred pages of new material. I also have rewritten every paragraph for faster and greater reading ease. I am delighted to present to you this updated edition of *The Seven Keys*.

April 3, 1994
Easter Sunday

A Word from the Author

HOW IT BEGAN

For 10 years I was very fortunate to have had as my mentor and friend the late Dr. George M. Lamsa. He was a native Assyrian, Near Eastern theologian, Aramaic expert, Bible translator, and ethnologist. In 1957 Dr. Lamsa published his English translation of the Aramaic Peshitta Text of the Holy Bible.

In August 1962 I initiated a thorough study of all the published works of this great Eastern scholar. I also conducted classes teaching this biblical Aramaic perspective and unchanged Near Eastern customs. Almost immediately I received requests from various organizations and denominations for a concise teaching system that presented the Near Eastern Aramaic cultural viewpoint. Because of these requests, I developed *The Seven Keys*. It is a basic course that presents the Bible through Eastern eyes. In the early 70's I extended this program throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

My *Seven Keys* course of study provides a broader understanding of the Bible. Its teaching is not restricted to any particular denominational interpretation. This approach makes it easier for those who have had no previous knowledge of the Bible to grasp its meaning more readily.

Since the very first presentation of the *Seven Keys Course*, I have been flooded with letters requesting that seminar material and additional information appear in book form. Consequently, the birth of the present work — *Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys*.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SEVEN KEYS

I based this book on my 10 years of intensive education with Dr. Lamsa, knowledge of Aramaic and Hebrew, and my continued research of biblical Near Eastern studies. Although this book differs from critical source/historical and literary methods in contemporary academic analysis of the Bible, it does include some of their findings and conclusions. However, the information derives from my seminar materials along with new data.

The Seven Keys create a simple, direct approach to sacred Scripture. Their purpose is to familiarize the reader with Semitic customs and forms of thinking. I use popular, everyday language and not weighty theological terminology. This course builds a bridge so that anyone may cross into the world of the ancient Near East.

It is not my intention to convert the reader to any system of belief or interpretation of the Bible. My aim is to present an alternative course one may take in searching and studying the Tanakh (O.T.) and the New Testament.

SCRIPTURAL QUOTATIONS

Most of the scriptural excerpts are from the King James Version of the Bible and the abbreviation KJV follows each of these quotations. I have also made use of *The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts* by G. M. Lamsa, and each quotation is identified as the "Lamsa Translation." There are other biblical passages appearing in this book that I have translated directly from Peshitta Aramaic Manuscripts: The Ambrosianus Codex (Old Testament), and the Mortimer-Macauley scrolls of

the New Testament. In addition, I have also referenced all citations from other authors in the footnotes. The reader needs to understand that this book is not an exhaustive study, but a panoramic view of the Bible through Eastern eyes.

FORMATION OF THE BOOK

I have structured *Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys* into two parts with an Introduction: Part One, Chapters 1–7, develops each of the Seven Keys relating biblical examples. Part Two, Chapters 8–10, is a commentary on both the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and the New Testament. I chose verses that people usually ask about during my lectures. These comments illustrate the application of the Seven Keys to various passages of Scripture.

A FINAL WORD

I have attempted as much as possible to avoid a collision with denominational interpretations and theological biblical implications. However, in certain scriptural passages cited in this volume it became unavoidable. Apparently some biblical interpreters have unwittingly formed and established monumental dogmas and confusing ideas on a verse that was only an idiom, metaphor, or custom.

Above all, my sincere desire is that you may enjoy reading this book. May it guide you into further research and

understanding of Scripture. Its material will aid you in unlocking the door into great antiquity.¹

¹See the Bibliography for additional study.

Introduction

We are about to embark on a great adventure. The path we take is an unusual journey into the mysterious and often elusive world of the Near East. As we travel through the pages of the Holy Bible, we will unlock many puzzling scriptures. We shall also apply seven major keys to various enigmatic verses of Scripture. In so doing, we will perceive the uncomplicated meaning of these biblical passages.

These Seven Keys enable the reader to sense the beauty and creative force of the Bible as seen through Eastern eyes. They shall equip us so that we may learn to think and feel as did the original Semitic authors. The motives and teachings of the Hebrew patriarchs, prophets, Jesus, and his apostles come alive through these Seven Keys.

THE SEVEN KEYS

The purpose of this book is to clarify obscure passages of Scripture, ideas about the God of Israel, Jesus' teaching, humankind, and the universe that we may have incorrectly understood from the biblical writers. When we study Scripture from an Eastern perspective, we readily discern more clearly an authentic and wholesome *image* of ourselves and our world.

The seven keys bridge four thousand years of antiquity. In keeping with Eastern thought and its use of the number seven, the following are the seven Eastern biblical keys:

1. The Aramaic Language
2. The Idioms in the Bible

3. The Mysticism of the Near East
4. The Semitic Culture of the Near East
5. The Psychology of the Near East
6. The Symbolism of the Near East
7. Near Eastern Amplification

THE NUMBER SEVEN

Near Eastern Semitic people believe that numbers have a meaning greater than just their numerical value. They hold that the number seven is the most sacred of all numbers. Yet it is not uncommon for this number to be a part of their daily customs, manners, and conversations. Biblical authors extensively used the sacred number seven in their writings. Genesis, the first chapter, abounds in an obvious and subtle use of this holy number.

Another example is the last book of the New Testament. The literary design of the book of The Revelation is a sevenfold structure. It is replete with specialized utilization of seven i.e., seven churches, angels (messengers), admonitions, lampstands, seals, trumpets, bowls, and so forth.

Some researchers claim that adoption of the number seven originated from pristine astronomy. Seven planets (heavenly bodies) were known to the ancients, i.e., Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The Jewish and Muhammadan calendars are based upon phases of the moon, and their months have twenty-eight days. Seven is a quarterly division of this unit. According to Near Eastern people, seven signifies completeness and perfection. Following this tradition, I accordingly developed Seven Keys in my approach to Scripture.

SEMITIC BACKGROUND

It is very important to know the setting in which the Bible originated. We too often forget that this sacred literature is a Near Eastern book. Its authors and editors wrote their teaching primarily to Semitic peoples. The biblical and philosophical truths have entered our Western world, figuratively speaking, clothed in Near Eastern garments. This fact alone presents a challenge for the Bible reader.

The late Dr. Abraham M. Rihbany, a Lebanese minister and author, puts this idea very succinctly in his book, *The Syrian Christ*:

The need of the Western readers of the Bible is, in my judgment, to enter sympathetically and intelligently into the atmosphere in which the books of the Scriptures first took form: to have real intellectual, as well as spiritual, fellowship with those Easterners [Semites] who sought earnestly in their own way to give tangible form to those great spiritual truths which have been, and ever shall be, humanity's most precious heritage.¹

We must always keep in mind the fact that writers of Scripture did not write to us in the Western world. These authors wrote to their own people of the Near East. Nevertheless, the eternal truths that these biblical writers taught are applicable for all humanity. The following paragraphs outline a brief idea of each key and how the keys unlock the so-called mysteries of the Bible.

¹Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. vi.

THE FIRST KEY — ARAMAIC

In 1943 a Roman Catholic encyclical² issued by the Pope stressed the need for interpreting Holy Scripture to apply its lessons to then existing conditions. The encyclical emphasized the importance of studying the biblical languages of "*Aramaic and Hebrew as a sound basis for understanding sacred Scripture.*" Aramaic was the tongue spoken by Jesus Christ. And in 1971, the Roman Catholic faith placed greater emphasis on the Bible.

The Vatican Ecumenical Council put the Bible in a place of prime importance in the Church. No longer do Roman Catholic biblical experts treat it as though it were factual in every detail. Like their Protestant colleagues, they are investigating the possibility that the Bible expresses ideas rather than clear-cut history. They are digging into Hebrew and Aramaic texts. They are *searching for meanings perhaps still hidden.*³

Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek are the three major languages most commonly used in biblical inquiry and translations. In this book, I have chosen the Aramaic language as the principal language for our studies. I will also refer to Hebrew when necessary. Aramaic and Hebrew are cognate (sister) languages. Around the 8th century B.C.E., Aramaic, a Semitic tongue, was the language of three powerful imperial nations: Assyria, Babylon (Chaldea), and Persia (known today as Iran). Aramaic was also the spoken tongue of Palestine during the life of Jesus. It remained the religious and commercial language throughout the Near East until the 7th century, C.E. Then

²A circular — in this case a religious circular.

³*Daily American* (Newspaper): Rome, Italy, July 10, 1971.

Arabic began replacing Aramaic as the lingua franca of the Near East.⁴

Aramaic is far from being a dead language. To this very day, Aramaic is spoken in various parts of the world. There are many Assyrian and Chaldean Aramaic-speaking communities, large and small, throughout the United States, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sweden, and Australia.⁵

Jesus, his apostles, and contemporaries taught and preached in the Aramaic language. Papias (ca. 60–130), Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, tells us that Matthew wrote his gospel in the Hebrew (Aramaic) language.⁶ Reverend Carl Sumner Knoph, Ph.D.,⁷ says, "Sections of Matthew's gospel point quite definitely to a Greek rendering of a previous Aramaic original. . . ."⁸ Dr. Knoph also says that Jesus and his disciples used the Jewish vernacular—Aramaic.

According to one theory promoted by some Western scholars, the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the book of Acts penned these books originally in Aramaic.⁹ Interestingly, there are a few Eastern biblical authorities who claim that the *entire* New Testament was originally in Aramaic

⁴See Philip K. Hitti, *The Near East in History: The Aramaic Language*.

⁵See Rocco A. Errico, *The Message of Matthew: An Annotated Parallel Aramaic-English Gospel of Matthew*, "The Aramaic Language — A Brief History" pp. xi–xiii.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv.

⁷Dean of the School of Religion and Professor of Biblical Literature and Archaeology at the University of Southern California.

⁸*Comrades of the Way — The Methodist Book Concern*, p. 33.

⁹See C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*; also, Charles Cutler Torrey, *The four Gospels, A New Translation*, 235–86, "The Origin of the Gospels; also, Matthew Black, *Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*; G. M. Lamsa, *New Testament Origin*.

before it appeared in the Greek language. They posit that the New Testament made its appearance in Palestinian Aramaic first; then it was translated into Greek, and later into the present Eastern Aramaic (Estrangela) manuscripts from Greek. Nevertheless, it is not the intention of this book to defend or prove Aramaic as the original written language of the gospels.

My purpose is to focus on the Semitic, Aramaic tongue, and its influence and importance to New Testament studies. I will also present English translations of Aramaic texts, and aspects of Near Eastern culture, so that we may expand our understanding of the Bible from these Eastern perspectives. In the coming chapters, we will apply the first key by showing some comparative differences between the King James Bible translation and English translations from Aramaic texts.

THE SECOND KEY — IDIOMS

Semitic idiomatic phrases fill the Bible. Idioms in any language have at one time or another created misunderstandings. Biblical languages are no exception, for there are many idiomatic sayings in Scripture that are not easy to comprehend, simply because they are translated literally.

The definition of an idiom, along with many scriptural idiomatic examples, will be explained in Chapter 2 — "Idioms in the Bible." However, this book's objective is to acquaint the reader with various important idiomatic expressions.

THE THIRD KEY — MYSTICISM

We would be doing an injustice to Semitic people if we failed to recognize their mystical nature and capacity for spiritual dreams and visions. Biblical mysticism is very down to earth and practical. It is helpful to realize that the spiritual principles, and the mystical atmosphere of those principles themselves, have come from the heart and soul of a nation of people. Semites often say: "Our senses can hear the intimate whispering of the divine Spirit."

Over 40 percent of the Bible is based on mysticism. The spectrum of mysticism encompasses dreams, visions, voices, acts of healing, clairaudience (inner hearing), clairvoyance (inner sight), and bi-location (out of body experiences). In the coming chapters, we will examine many passages of Scripture that deal with these mystical experiences.

THE FOURTH KEY — CULTURE

It is necessary to know more than just the geography of a country if we want to understand the people of that country. Therefore, to flow with the spirit of the Bible, we must be familiar with the culture of the people. The biblical writers were greatly influenced by their own culture. Their social habits, customs, and manners play an important role in the life of their nation. When we study the social forces that governed the inhabitants of the biblical lands, we can see the inner impulses that guided the authors of the Bible.

What makes our approach to Eastern culture different from any other biblical system of study is this: In the mountain vastness of what is known today as Kurdistan, the discovery of

a race of people, thought to be extinct, took place around the middle of the 19th century. This surviving remnant was descended from a nation that once ruled the ancient Near East, known as the Assyrians. These descendants, largely mixed with the blood of the ten Northern tribes of Israel, still live, think, and speak as did the people among whom Jesus was born and to whom he taught his message. Here is a vital quotation from a British scholar who lived among these people, the late Dr. W. A. Wigram:

We have now traced the history of a strange nation, from very early days to what is practically our own time — up to, in fact, the eve of the Great War . . . A strange survival in an isolated corner of the world, these last representatives of the ancient Assyrian stock have hitherto *kept up the most primitive of Semitic customs to an extent that can hardly be paralleled elsewhere, even in the Mesopotamian marsh districts*. One thing is certain, that the Assyrians boast with justice that they *alone* of all Christian nations still keep as their spoken language what is acknowledged to be the language of Palestine in the first century, and that therefore they alone among Christian nations, if we except a few villages that may still exist in Lebanon, use regularly the language of Christ.¹⁰

THE FIFTH KEY — PSYCHOLOGY

Customs and psychology are bound together. Customs come from the psychological makeup of a nation. Easterners (Semites) think differently than we do and therefore respond to life's circumstances accordingly. For example, if you were an

¹⁰W. A. Wigram, *The Assyrians and Their Neighbors*, pp. 177, 181.

Easterner and wished to become a popular speaker, you would "play hard to get." In other words, you would not advertise yourself; you let people seek you out. Jesus said, "He who exalts himself shall be abased, and he who abases himself shall be exalted."

Another example, in certain areas, if you wished to congratulate a speaker, you would tell him, "I didn't understand a word you said." He would then look toward heaven and give many thanks to God. The implication is that the speaker was very deep and knowledgeable and that you, as a listener, would have to keep returning to hear him repeatedly. You have really paid him a compliment.

THE SIXTH KEY — SYMBOLISM

The symbolism of the Near East includes parables, poetical philosophy, and figurative speech. Hebrew prophets used many symbols. For example, these seers often referred to imperial nations as lions, bears, and leopards and smaller powers as goats and lambs.

A symbol impresses the mind more quickly than mere words and is not so easily forgotten. The book of Revelation contains over one thousand symbols. For instance, the author of Revelation describes a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, a description that would definitely make a lasting impression. Eastern people, of course, could decipher the meaning almost immediately. Seven represents perfection and completeness. The lamb signifies Jesus as the Messiah. (Metaphysically: the lamb also is symbolic of a Christed-Anointed consciousness.) Seven horns denote complete authority, and the seven eyes depict total vision and insight.

Parables are also very important because Eastern teachers impart their ideas and thoughts through stories. Again, storytellers tell parables so that the listener will not forget their teaching. To an Easterner, a parable makes a greater impression than just statements of fact. Jesus, being an Easterner, taught his insights and imparted his teachings in parable form so that the masses would understand and remember his word. The prophets also used parables, allegories, and metaphors when they made their exhortations.

The book of Job is the best example of poetic philosophy. Its story of the successive calamities that had come upon poor Job is an unforgettable saga. Job's author(s) wrote the book in typical Eastern style to answer the philosophical question: Why do good people suffer? In the chapters that follow we will look into some of the symbolism of the Bible.

THE SEVENTH KEY — AMPLIFICATION

Semites enjoy putting more "color" into a situation than merely describing an actual happening with detailed accuracy. What better way is there to glorify an event and to make an everlasting impression than to amplify and magnify the occurrence!

To help us grasp the idea of amplification, let us compare an event to a beautiful painting on canvas. When one frames a painting, the scene is then enhanced. The picture now has dimension and is set within certain boundaries. Thus, Eastern people like to *frame* an event or situation. For instance, a speaker or writer will add more people, not in the hundreds but in the thousands, to his story. Again, biblical

writers use exaggerated expression of speech not to deceive, but to permanently *frame* an event and make it truly unforgettable.

CONCLUSION

We are about to begin our journey through Scripture using *The Seven Keys*. We will open many passages that have puzzled us and shine light here and there. Wherever possible, we will bypass doctrinal and denominational creeds, confessions, and issues.

Now with Seven Keys in our hands, we are ready to recline upon an imaginary flying carpet. This Eastern carpet will carry us back into the ancient, mystical, biblical world of the Near East. Being carried by invisible airways, we shall travel through the pages of the Bible, discovering clearer meanings of holy Scripture. So let us venture into many events and episodes of this intriguing Book we call the Bible . . .

PART ONE

The Seven Keys

Chapters 1–7

CHAPTER 1

The First Key Aramaic

Before applying the first key, Aramaic, to specific biblical passages, it is necessary to mention a few brief facts. We need first to take a closer look at the Near East, Aramaic texts, and the Semites who spoke this language. Let us begin with a glimpse of the Near East and its contributions to Western civilization.

THE NEAR EAST

According to Will Durant — historian, philosopher, and educator — the West owes a great deal to the Near Eastern world. It can be thankful for the Near Eastern development of the following: agriculture, commerce, the horse and wagon, wheel, coinage, letters of credit, craft, industries, law, government, mathematics, medicine, geometry, astronomy, the calendar, clock, zodiac, paper, ink, the alphabet, writing, books, libraries, schools, cosmetics, jewelry, income tax, beer, and too much more to mention.¹ It was from Eastern lands that we derived much benefit for our modern societies through the mediation of Crete, Greece, and Rome. Greece also received

¹See Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage: The Story of Civilization*, Chapter VII, "SUMERIA: Orientation — Contributions of the Near East to Western civilization" (New York, Simon and Schuster: 1954), p. 116.

much. It became the inheritor of three thousand years of Near Eastern arts and sciences. All this arrived in Greek cities through the fortunes of war and trade.²

THE ARAMAIC LANGUAGE

Who spoke and used the Aramaic language? What about its origin? How important was it in the ancient world? The following is a brief history of this Semitic tongue.

Aramaic made its historical appearance toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E. in Mesopotamia — the Fertile Crescent of the ancient Near East. Gradually, at the outset of the first millennium B.C.E., written and spoken forms of Aramaic began making inroads throughout Near Eastern lands. It was the language of the Arameans, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Hebrews, and Syrians. Linguists classify it as one of the Afro-Asiatic family of languages.

Historians tell us that the term "Aramaic" derives from Aram. According to Hebrew Scripture, Aram was the grandson of Noah.³ Aram is an eponymous ancestor⁴ of the *Arameans*, an important West Semitic people.

Aramaic is the best-attested and longest-attested member of the northwest Semitic subfamily of Semitic dialects. In time it attracted all classes of people, government officials, mer-

²See Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*.

³Gen. 10:22.

⁴"Eponymous ancestor" — the explanation of the name of a city or a people originating from an individual of antiquity who is said to have been its forefather.

chants, and writers. This is because its alphabet was practical, and its style of writing and speaking was simple. Thus, by the 8th century B.C.E., Aramaic became the major language from Egypt to Asia Minor to Pakistan. Assyria and Chaldea (Babylon) employed this language. The Persian (Iranian) government used it in the Western Provinces. This Semitic tongue continues its history as a spoken and written language in today's world. Modern Assyrians, Chaldeans, and other Semitic communities in the Near and Middle East, Australia, the United States and elsewhere regularly speak it at home. They also use it in their social, political, and domestic meetings, and in their religious worship.

Jesus' apostles, disciples, and followers proclaimed and taught his joyful message all over Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Mesopotamia in the Galilean Aramaic dialect. Aramaic remained the common language of the Near East until the 7th century C.E.; then Arabic gradually began to supplant Aramaic as the major tongue of the East. Nonetheless, the Christians of Mesopotamia (Iraq), Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon kept the Aramaic tongue alive domestically, scholastically, and liturgically. In spite of the pressure of the ruling Arabs to speak Arabic, Aramaic still survives in many Near Eastern dialects.

Another important aspect of Aramaic is that it was the major tongue for the birth and spread of spiritual and intellectual ideas throughout the Near East. According to the research of an outstanding Aramaic and Arabic scholar, Professor Franz Rosenthal, in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*:

In my view, the history of Aramaic represents the purest triumph of the human spirit as embodied in language

(which is the mind's most direct form of physical expression) over the crude display of material power. . . . Great empires were conquered by the Aramaic language, and when they disappeared and were submerged in the flow of history, that language persisted and continued to live a life of its own. . . . The language continued to be powerfully active in the promulgation of spiritual matters. It was the main instrument for the formulation of religious ideas in the Near East, which then spread in all directions all over the world. . . . The monotheistic groups continue to live on today with a religious heritage, much of which found first expression in Aramaic.⁵

HEBREWS

Who are the Hebrews? To answer this question, we must go back four thousand years to a group of wandering desert people, seminomads. Initially, people called them Hebrews. The term "Hebrew" is ethnically derived, most likely, from the "children of Eber."⁶ In dress and custom they could not be distinguished from other groups of seminomads.

These wandering sheep-and goat-herders, and others like them, entered the Western portion of the Fertile Crescent during the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. They spoke a West Semitic dialect, a close relative to Aramaic. Moving back and forth between the existing cultural centers, they also traded in grain, wine, and wool.

Biblical narratives show that the Hebrews emanated from the centers of Mesopotamian culture. However, they originally

⁵F. Rosenthal, "Aramaic Studies during the past thirty years," in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 81-82.

⁶Gen. 10:21. Again, we have an eponymous ancestor.

came from the Arabian desert, and some of them moved from the desert to southern Mesopotamia (Ur). Much later they migrated to Aram-naharayim, and from there they entered Canaan and Transjordan.⁷ In the *New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (1970), it clearly states:

According to the Bible (Gen. 10:22), Aram and Israel had a common ancestry and the Israelite patriarchs were of *Aramaic* origin and maintained ties of marriage with the tribes of *Aram*.⁸

Early Jewish Christianity and Islam have their roots in the teachings of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets, which sprang from a group of Semitic tribes in the desert. The incredibly difficult struggle to survive desert life produced simplicity and equality among those tribal desert-dwellers and wanderers. They felt a deep responsibility for other members of their clan. Naturally, the outcome was a tight-knit family relationship, a strong sense of dignity, and personal morality. These seminomads spoke a West Semitic dialect of Aramaic. The deity that guided them in the vast, trackless deserts and uncharted lands of the Near East was known as the Provider.

Aramaic was the language of the Hebrew patriarchs, or at least a West Semitic dialect of it. First-century evidence clearly shows that the country people spoke Aramaic as the

⁷For more details on the term "Hebrew," see Irving M. Zeitlin, *Ancient Judaism*, "Habiru and Hebrew," pp. 52–55; Allan Tarshish, *Not By Power*, p. 15; Daniel Jeremy Silver, *A History of Judaism: From Abraham to Maimonides*, Volume 1, "The Fathers and Their Way," pp. 3–9.

⁸*New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (1970), pp. 139–140. Although many hold to the relationship between the Hebrews and Arameans, modern biblical scholars dispute this idea.

most common language throughout Palestine.⁹ Therefore, it was the language of Jesus. He taught and preached his message in the Aramaic tongue. The oldest complete Aramaic New Testament dates back to the 6th or 7th centuries C.E. Scholars debate the dates for the Aramaic texts of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). Some biblical authorities suggest the 5th century C.E. However, according to many of these experts, Aramaic texts are reliable. They often present clearer meanings to many obscure verses of the Bible.

ARAMAIC UNLOCKS THE DOOR TO BIBLICAL RIDDLES

As a lecturer and teacher of Sacred Scripture, I have been asked countless times about many puzzling passages of the Bible. There are hundreds of verses that are difficult to understand. Most readers find them bewildering.

For instance, have you ever wondered why Jesus taught us to pray, "*lead us not into temptation*"? Does this imply that God may lead us into trouble? Is God ambivalent?

In the August 1982 issue of *Newsweek*, there appeared an article titled "Giving the Devil His Due," which suggests the idea that God's nature is ambivalent. The religious writer cited that Jesus taught his disciples to beseech the Father not to lead them into temptation. This, of course, confirmed for the author of the *Newsweek* article that Jesus' teaching affirmed God's ambivalence toward his worshipers.¹⁰

⁹See J. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, "The Languages of Palestine," pp. 29-56.

¹⁰*Newsweek*, August 30, 1982, p. 73.

Have you ever been puzzled by this verse in Exodus: "For I the Lord [Yahweh] thy God am a jealous God."¹¹ And again in Exodus: ". . . for the Lord [Yahweh] whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."¹² John says, "God is love."¹³ "Love" is a synonym for "God." But is the infinite Presence (God) really pure, unconditional love, or does God (love) express jealousy? If so, of whom or of what is God jealous? Is the love of God limited by jealousy? Does God, as love, evidence Itself as jealousy?

MORE RIDDLES

You may have questioned Jesus' words: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."¹⁴ Does Jesus encourage disobedience to the Fifth Commandment? It says: "Honor thy father and mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."¹⁵

Matthew tells us that Jesus taught: "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."¹⁶ Jesus clearly teaches us to love, bless, do

¹¹Ex. 20:5, KJV.

¹²Ex. 34:14, KJV.

¹³1 Jn. 4:8.

¹⁴Lk. 14:26, KJV.

¹⁵Ex. 20:12.

¹⁶Mt. 5:44, KJV.

good and pray for our enemies, persecutors, and those who curse and hate us. Yet, for one to be his disciple, one must apparently hate his parents and family. How do we reconcile this contradiction?

Have you also tried to figure out why God, the Father and Source of abundant mercies, would forsake Jesus on the cross? After all, the gospel writers tell us that Jesus obeyed the Father's will by accepting the crucifixion.¹⁷ Would God withhold his comforting presence when Jesus needed him most? What kind of loving father would abandon his own son at such a crucial hour of suffering? Nevertheless, we read in the gospel that Jesus cried out: "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?"¹⁸

You could, I am sure, add many more contradictory passages to the few I have suggested. I have seen some people, out of great frustration, completely turn aside from reading the Bible. They feel that so much of what they read denies a positive, universal, and relevant philosophy of life for them.

Others believe that they must not question Holy Word. The problem of trying to bridge four thousand years of antiquity is too much and, in a manner of speaking, this is true for most people. On the other hand, there is also the dilemma of those who accept puzzling biblical contradictions on faith alone.

Can some of these challenges be met and solved? Yes. As we explore various passages through English translations of Aramaic texts, we find clearer renditions of these verses. We also avoid wrestling with old scriptural contradictions of the past.

¹⁷See Mt. 26:39.

¹⁸Mt. 27:46, KJV.

RIDDLES SOLVED

Did Jesus say "lead us not into temptation"? In Aramaic he said *wla talan*, meaning, "And do not let us enter." So what Jesus truly said was: "And do not let us enter temptation."¹⁹ The meaning is clear. Jesus, through his prayer, teaches us to remain alert so that an alluring trap (temptation) may not ensnare us.

Benjamin Franklin also found the English translation of this verse undesirable. He changed it to read "and keep us out of temptation." I find it fascinating that Benjamin Franklin intuited the meaning of this verse without knowing the Aramaic language.

JEALOUS OR ZEALOUS?

What about the problem of God's jealousy? *Tanana* in Aramaic means "zealous," "ardent desire," and "jealous." Therefore, a more appropriate translation of what God told Moses is: "because I am the Lord [Yahweh] your God, a zealous God."²⁰ "Zealous" denotes a divine care. *Yahweh* God was *zealous* for his people. Law, order, justice, and righteousness were to reign among the Hebrews.

Then again, the King James Version says: "for thou shalt worship no other god; for the Lord [Yahweh], whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." However, the Aramaic text reads: "For you shall worship no other god; for the Lord [Yahweh]

¹⁹See Lamsa translation of the Lord's Prayer.

²⁰Ex. 20:5, Aramaic text, Errico translation.

whose name is Zealous, is a zealous God."²¹ What is most interesting is that the Hebrew noun *kin'ah* also means "zealous."

According to Jewish commentators, the rendering of the noun *kin'ah* as "jealous" when it relates to divine disfavor, has nothing in common with our English word "jealousy."

Kin'ah is derived from the verb *kannah*, "to acquire as one's own property." It denotes in the first instance the vindication of one's rights. The phrase *semel hakkin'ah hammakneh* (the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy,²²) has the meaning "the image of outraged authority, which provoketh Him to vindicate his exclusive rights." Similarly, the phrase *wenathatti kin'ath bach* (And I will set My jealousy against thee,²³) should be understood as "And I will set My violated rights against thee."

The term *kin'ah* describing God as *zealous* for His violated rights is used in Ezekiel and in other parts of the Bible only in respect of the cardinal sins of idolatry and immorality. Attributing *kin'ah* to God is simply an expression of certain retribution for these offenses which undermine the existence of human society.²⁴

HATE

In November 1961 an article appearing in a Soviet

²¹Ex. 34:14, Errico translation.

²²Ezk. 8:3, KJV.

²³Ezk. 23:25, KJV.

²⁴Commentary by Rabbi Dr. S. Fisch, M.A., *Ezekiel: with Hebrew Text and English Translation*, "Introduction" (London: The Soncino Press, 1972), p. xv.

scientific and religious publication deprecated Christianity. It referred to the "contradictory and hypocritical morals and teaching of Christian churches and theologies. . . ." Among the many objections this article raised was Jesus' command to "hate" one's family in order to become his disciple. This command has confused many people, not just the Russian writer. We know the meaning of Jesus' command was to put his teachings first above all else. However, we must still contend with the word "hate" in the scriptural text.

Some time ago a syndicated religious column in our American newspapers answered the question of why Jesus chose the word "hate." The column said that Jesus did not mean to "hate," but to "love less." The religious writer went on to explain the Aramaic meaning of the word. But, alas, the truth is that nowhere in any Aramaic dictionary does the word mean "love less." Nor, for that matter, does it suggest to "love a *little* less."

The Aramaic term *sna* is a forceful word and means "to hate," in the sense of "detest" and "despise." Nonetheless, *sna* has five prime meanings: "to hate," "to stand up straight," "to put out a candle or light," "a threshing floor," and "to set to one's side." Thus, by using the last meaning of *sna*, we see what Jesus truly said: "He who comes to me and does not put to one side his father and his mother. . . ." Jesus knew that anyone who wished to be his disciple might be challenged by his or her family.

Also, Jesus had warned the people about the consequences of his teachings. He said: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-

in-law against her mother-in-law."²⁵ He uses the term "sword" as a metaphor. In the Aramaic language, it also means "war" and it suggests "division." Religious leaders of that era and in the future would ostracize and persecute Jesus' disciples and followers, some of whom would receive severe punishment or death. Thus the meaning of Jesus' saying: "And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Some parents would turn their sons and daughters over to the authorities. Now we can understand what Jesus intended when he said: "He who comes to me and does not put to one side his father and his mother and his brothers. . . . cannot be my disciple." We can also see that being "less loving" has nothing to do with what Jesus meant.

WAS JESUS FORSAKEN?

An utterance made by Jesus from the cross is a serious stumbling block for many Bible students. "And about the ninth hour," reports the writer of the gospel, "Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying Eli, Eli, l'mana Sabachtani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"²⁶ All Greek gospel texts of Matthew retain this cry of Jesus in his own native Aramaic language.

Below is my transliteration of Jesus' Aramaic utterance followed by a literal English translation. Note that the King James Version of the gospel presents Jesus' cry as a question. This implies that Jesus did not understand what was happening to him. It also tells us Jesus felt that God had forsaken him.

²⁵Mt. 10:34-35 KJV.

²⁶Mt.27:46, KJV.

However, this Aramaic expression can also be understood as a declaration instead of a question.

"*'el, 'el, l'mana shwaqthani: O God! O God! To what [a purpose] You have kept me!*" Jesus cried out with a deep knowingness of his reason for having lived and for dying. His cry was a victorious one. God did not abandon him.

A terse and literal rendering of this cry would be: "O Sustainer! O Sustainer! To what [a purpose] You have left me!" The word "left" in this context does not mean "forsaken or abandoned." It means "remaining to fulfill an end or a destiny." In the Lamsa Bible translation, this verse is interpreted as: "*At about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice and said, Eli, Eli, lemana shabakthani My God, my God, for this I was spared!*" Dr. Lamsa adds a footnote to the last part of Jesus' exclamation and retranslates it as "*for this was my destiny!*"

THE TWENTY-SECOND PSALM

Some biblical authorities claim that Jesus quoted the 22nd Psalm while on the cross. The psalmist says: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?"²⁷ Dr. George M. Lamsa in his "Introduction to the Psalms" thinks that Jesus did not quote the first verse of the 22nd Psalm while suffering on the cross. In his translation of the Peshitta text, Dr. Lamsa translates verse 1 as: "My God, my God, why hast thou let me to live? and yet thou hast delayed my salvation from me,

²⁷Ps. 22:1, KJV.

because of the words of my folly."²⁸ He further comments:

The Aramaic word *shawaqthani* which appears in Psalm 22 is rendered "let me live," that is, "spare me" instead of "forsaken me." Easterners when suffering in distress wonder why they live and ask God why he has spared them, and why he has not taken them like their fathers. The phrase *l'mana shawaqthani* is also used by Easterners to confirm one's destiny. [See Matt. 27:46, Lamsa translation.]

Shawaq also means "to keep," as in Rom. 11:4, Isa. 10:3, Isa. 14:1 of the Eastern text, and "to forgive," as in Matt. 6:12. It can also be translated "forsake" with the sense of sparing — that is, letting a person live but doing nothing to relieve his suffering.

God forsakes no one. He is mindful of all his children. Nevertheless, sometimes when we are discouraged or suffering, we wonder why our deliverance is delayed and why God does not act promptly. God is patient and does things in His own way. In Psalm 22, the psalmist wonders why he or Israel has been spared to go through so many struggles, and why God has not speedily punished their enemies. Simultaneously he is mindful of God's presence as he converses with him. If God had forsaken him, how could the psalmist converse with Him?²⁹

Not anywhere does the New Testament Aramaic text suggest that Jesus questioned God or expressed doubt. Instead, when the original Aramaic intent is correctly understood, it strongly affirms that Jesus was fully aware of his Father's presence. Through his entire crucifixion, Jesus knew the

²⁸Ps. 22:1, Lamsa translation.

²⁹George M. Lamsa, *The Book of Psalms*, p. xiv.

closeness of his Father.

The cross was victory over death. It revealed to humanity the meaning of immortality. Jesus, through his resurrection, abolished the fear of death. In his letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul encouraged the young minister with these words: "For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of good discipline. . . . And it is now made manifest by the appearing of our savior Jesus the Messiah, who has abolished death and has revealed life and immortality through the joyful message."³⁰

AN ANCIENT COMMENTARY

A ninth-century C.E. commentary explains Jesus' words uttered from the cross. The title of this ancient scroll reads: "*The Testimony [or Evidence] from the Book of Commentaries of Lord Ishodad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha, Beth Naharain [Mesopotamia] 850 C.E., Bishop of the Church of the East.*" Unfortunately, this intriguing and illuminating handwritten commentary is accessible only in the Aramaic language. Nonetheless, I have translated below a small portion of it for my readers. The English rendering appears clumsy because I want to retain the thrust and intent of the writer. As much as possible, I give a word-for-word translation, retaining its original style of punctuation. My translation follows:

The explanation of 'el, 'el, l'mana shwaktani: *Not at all was he forsaken by the Godhead. Not even during suffering nor during death because the Godhead was always with him —*

³⁰2 Tim. 1:7, 10, Aramaic text, Errico translation.

in suffering and on the cross and in death and in the grave;
And very God Himself raised him in power and in glory as
in the psalm of David: For You have not left my soul in
sheol.³¹ And neither have You allowed Your holy one to
see corruption.³²

Ishodad's commentary is a reassuring testimony of God's comforting presence. The lesson this scripture teaches is that God is always with us — in suffering and in joy. The truth is that God never forsakes anyone any time, anywhere! His truth, power and presence are ever working to guide all humanity into paths of enlightenment.

A FINAL COMMENT

As stated earlier, many New Testament authorities believe that Jesus was reciting the 22nd Psalm on the cross. The reason for this is that before their death pious Jews recite this Psalm. However, others have suggested that if Jesus did recite the 22nd Psalm, Matthew would have said: "So that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by. . . ." etc.

Jesus' usual way of referring to God was "my Father" and "our Father." On one or two occasions he did say: "My God." However, some New Testament experts maintain that Jesus never made this utterance at all. They believe the final redactor (editor) or copyist added it to the text. Not all scholars agree with this interpretation. In his gospel, Mark records the same utterance. However, he uses the East Aramaic dialect for God,

³¹According to ancient Hebrew belief, *sheol* is a place of silence and inactivity for the departed.

³²The writings of Ishodad, Errico translation.

alaha, and not *'el*.

COMPARATIVE DIFFERENCES

The following are comparative differences between the King James version of the Bible and my translation of the Aramaic Peshitta text. These direct translations from Aramaic to English shed much light on these cited passages, and with some of them, the meaning changes completely. I make no comment on the verses, but allow the reader to evaluate the differences for him/herself.

Job 12:6

The tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure; into whose hand God bringeth abundantly. (KJV)

The tents of robbers shall perish, and the assurance of those who incite God because there is no God in their hearts. (Errico)

Job 31:10

Then let my wife grind unto another, and let others bow down upon her. (KJV)

Then let my wife grind [meal] for others and let her bake bread at another man's place. (Errico)

Psalm 7:11

God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day. (KJV)

God is a just judge and He is not angry every day. (Errico)

Psalm 23:2

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. (KJV)

And he makes me to dwell in pastures of strength. He guides me by refreshing waters. (Errico)

Psalm 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. (KJV)

Your loving kindness and compassion have pursued me all the days of my life; and I shall live in the house of the Lord for the length of days. (Errico)

Psalm 46:10

Be still and know that I am God! (KJV)

Return to me and know that I am God! (Errico)

Isaiah 43:28

Therefore I have profaned the princes of the sanctuary, and have given Jacob to the curse and Israel to reproaches. (KJV)

You princes have defiled the holy place [the sanctuary]; therefore I have given Jacob to the curse and Israel to shame.³³ (Errico)

Jeremiah 4:10

Then said I, ah Lord God; surely thou hast greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, Ye shall have peace; whereas the sword reacheth unto the soul. (KJV)

Then I said, I implore you, O Lord God, truly, I have deceived this people and Jerusalem exceedingly because I have said, You will have peace, and behold, the slain sword reaches as far as the soul. (Errico)

Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (KJV)

³³The Septuagint text of the Tanakh (O.T.) agrees with the Peshitta translation of Isa. 43:28. Isaiah says that the noblemen or chiefs of the people defiled God's sanctuary. In the KJV, Isaiah claims that God Himself had defiled the princes ("to defile" means "to commit impure acts").

Delighted are those who surrender to God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Errico)

Matthew 6:34

Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (KJV)

Now do not worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will take care of itself. Enough for the day is its own trouble. (Errico)

John 1:14

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten son of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (KJV)

And the word took human form and dwelt (tented) among us; and we saw his preciousness (glory), a preciousness like that of an only beloved son of the Father, who is filled with loving kindness and justice. (Errico)

2 Timothy 3:16

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (KJV)

All scripture that is written by the Spirit is useful for teaching, correction, right action, and for instruction in justice (piety). (Errico)

2 Peter 1:21

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (KJV)

For prophecy at no time ever came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke when they were impelled by the Holy Spirit. (Errico)

1 Corinthians 7:18

Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. (KJV)

If any man were circumcised when he was called, let him not turn to the party of the uncircumcised. (Errico)

CONCLUSION

There are literally thousands of variants in comparative scriptural passages. I would have to write a special volume to cover all of them. We have just applied the first key—Aramaic—to only a few verses of the Bible. We now begin to see how truly enlightening the Aramaic text is.

For those readers who wish to continue their studies of translation differences, I suggest *The Holy Bible: From Ancient*

Eastern Manuscripts, by George M. Lamsa, Th.D. Dr. Lamsa translated from ancient Aramaic manuscripts beginning with Genesis and finishing with Revelation. He also claims there are approximately 10,000 to 12,000 vital and major differences between his English rendering of the Bible and the King James Version.

In the forthcoming chapter, we are going to discuss some idiomatic phrases of Jesus' language. This exploration is a fascinating study. There are many more puzzling episodes waiting for us to apply the Second Key — Idioms.

CHAPTER 2

The Second Key Idioms

PECULIAR TERMS OF SPEECH

What is an idiom? An idiom is a peculiar expression of speech that says one thing but means something else. All languages have their unique speech modes. Anyone who learns a new language must also become familiar with the common colloquialisms of that language.

For example, let us examine a distinctive idiom from the Spanish language: "*No tengo lana*." It literally translates as "I have no wool." "*No tengo* — I have no," and "*lana* — wool." "*No tengo lana*" does not literally mean "I have no wool," (unless you herd sheep and sell wool) but it means "I have no money."

ENGLISH IDIOMS

I am sure that at one time or another you have used or heard these American idioms: "I'm going to hit the sack [or hay]," or "I'm going to sack out." Have you ever known anyone who has been in "hot water" for weeks and months "on end"? Or, perhaps someone you know has been "up in the air" for several days over a business deal.

We "blow our tops," "lose our marbles," and "become hot under the collar." Have you or a friend ever been in "a pickle," "a jam," or "out on a limb?" Have you ever paid "an arm and a leg" for some item? Some of us dress ourselves "fit to kill." We put "bugs in people's ears," and ask them to "get off our backs." Sometimes we go around with a "chip on our shoulder."

We receive information "directly from the horse's mouth." John "dropped in the office" and he "stewed over the situation" for a long time. Some business men and women remain "chained to their desks" all day long.

Immigrants coming to the United States have difficulty understanding us when we speak idiomatic English. And many are the foreign scholars whose use of English is impeccable, yet they feel bewildered in the maze of everyday, common speech when they reach our shores. How would they understand that Mickey Mantle "died on third base," or that "Purdue clubs Michigan State"? Our sports jargon can be ridiculously funny if taken literally.

The truth is that most of the time we carry on conversations using idiomatic expressions without stopping to think about it. Try for a day "to catch yourself" every time you "spout" an idiom. You will be surprised how often you "say one thing but mean something else."

I can remember as a child listening to one of my favorite radio programs, *Life with Luigi*. The entire format of this half hour program built itself around idioms. "Gags" were structured entirely on American idioms. Poor Luigi would often understand these Americanisms only at "face value."

Luigi was an Italian immigrant who spoke "broken" English. I recall one radio episode that illustrates how literally he took our English phrases of speech: Luigi had just received his driver's license, and, while driving home, he decided to make a "U" turn. However, there was a sign posted that forbade "U" turns at that intersection.

A motorcycle officer saw Luigi make the U turn, chased him down, brought him back to the sign, and questioned him about his ability to read. Luigi happily replied, "I can a-read anyding." The officer then asked him to read the street sign. Quickly and proudly, though nervously, the Italian began to read aloud, "Its-a-say, *No U a-Turn*." The patrol officer questioned, "Do you know what that means?" With great

emphasis, Luigi answered, "Yes sir. No *You-A-Turn* means its'-a-My Turn."

Interestingly, in our thinking we are often exactly like Luigi while reading and interpreting the Bible. We mistakenly understand biblical idioms *literally*. There are over a thousand idioms in the Bible. They were translated faithfully and accurately, but *literally*. Therefore, their true meanings are misconstrued. Let us examine a few of these idioms from Scripture.

BIBLICAL IDIOMS

". . . Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return into the ground."¹ Before explaining the idioms in this passage, a few points need clarification.

According to the latest biblical findings and scholarly research, Gen. 3:14-19 does not belong to the original structure of the Garden of Eden story. In an older form of the tale, Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden followed right after *Yahweh* God had discovered their disobedience and had heard their defense. Exile from the Garden of Eden was the original and only penalty placed on the man and woman. The sentences of punishment in verses 14-19 have no direct bearing with the offense committed. What these verses factually describe is the present state of existence of the serpent, woman, ground, and man. And, by way of afterthought, the biblical author explains their present conditions as punishments. Therefore verses 17b-19a are additions to the biblical narrative.

¹Gen. 3:17b-19a, KJV.

The author of these verses does use Semitic idioms. According to this passage, it appears that God created thorns, thistles, and perspiration specifically to punish human beings, although our common sense tells us otherwise. We know that thorns and thistles are nature's way of protecting certain species of plants. And we also know that perspiring is how the body cools itself when overheated and how it releases toxins. These things are not a *curse*.²

Now to us, thorns and thistles are irksome and can be painful if they pierce us. Thus the idiom means that existence for the human couple would become burdensome. They abused the trust that existed between them and their creator. They broke the one and only restriction *Yahweh* God had given them.

The term "sweat," in the figurative style of the Near East, refers idiomatically to the hardship that false, human philosophical beliefs bring into life. According to the story, God only curses the serpent and the ground and absolutely nothing else. In actuality, God never curses anything. Humanity itself, through ignorance and the acting out of its own self-defeating thought patterns, encounters "thorns," "thistles," and eats bread in the "sweat of its face." We must understand that the Garden of Eden story is a parable (a tale). The narrative should not be understood as a historical account.³

NABAL AND LOT'S WIFE

Among Near Eastern Aramaic-speaking people, a peculiar and very old idiom remains in use to this day: "to have one's body turn to stone." This simply means that the individual

²According to Gen. 3:14-19, God placed a curse only on the serpent and ground. He never cursed the man or the woman. Bear in mind that this is not a historical account.

³See Chapter 6, "Eden, Adam, and Eve," pp. 129-35.

has become paralyzed. In Scripture, we find something similar: "But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal [Nabal had been drinking the night before], and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became as stone."⁴

"His heart died within him" means he suffered a stroke. "And he became as stone" denotes the simple fact that he became paralyzed. In the very next verse, the storyteller informs us that Nabal died.

Again in the book of Genesis we read: "The Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."⁵ The idiom "to become a pillar of salt" means she suffered a stroke, became paralyzed, and died.⁶

JACOB BLESSES HIS SONS

While on his deathbed, the Hebrew patriarch Jacob (whose name was also Israel) called his twelve sons before him. He blessed each of them and prophesied to them concerning themselves and their future generations. According to Eastern custom, the aged patriarch would lift his head toward heaven, and with outstretched hands, say: "Gather yourselves together and hear, O sons of Jacob; and listen to Israel your father."⁷

⁴1 Sam. 25:37, KJV. For the entire story, read: 1 Sam. 25:2–38.

⁵Gen. 19:24–26, KJV.

⁶See George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light: A Scriptural Commentary based on the Aramaic of the Ancient Peshitta Text*, p. 56.

⁷Gen. 49:2, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

The wise father turned first to Reuben and prophesied to him, then to Simeon and Levi. Then he says to Judah: "He washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes; his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk."⁸ With these words, Israel blessed his son, Judah, with great prosperity.

The idioms "to wash one's garments in wine and in the blood (juice) of grapes" and "to have eyes red with wine" shows that Judah would have many prolific vineyards—he would prosper abundantly. "His teeth white with milk" means he would possess many flocks of goats and sheep. He would have more than ample milk supplies. Thus, Judah would prosper and succeed through vineyards and livestock.⁹

THE LAW AND GOD'S PERFECTION

Today, Near Eastern rug-sellers and merchants of any fine crafts or clothing bargain with prospective buyers, using traditional customs. Their language is very colorful and, of course, the names of God, His holy angels, saints, prophets, and apostles are brought into the conversation while bartering. To make an impression, the seller says, "In the most precious name of Allah [God], His blessed hand has made this rug." Or, he might say, "The finger of Allah made this garment." What the merchant means is "the rug is perfect" and "the garment is flawless." To have the hand or finger of God involved in anything is a beautiful way of saying, "This is the finest craftsmanship in the world." The rug, garment, or other merchandise is equated with God's hand to show absolute perfection, ultimate beauty and excellence.

⁸Gen. 49:11–12, KJV.

⁹See George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, pp. 96–107.

And so we read in Scripture that when God "... finished talking with him on the mountain of Sinai, He gave to Moses two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone that were written by the finger of God." ¹⁰ The witness in stone was the Law, i.e., the Ten Commandments. According to the Bible, God's finger had written these commandments on the stone tablets.

Egyptian magicians tutored Moses. He studied the wisdom and esoteric teachings of the Assyrians, Chaldeans (Babylonians), and Egyptians. He was familiar with the Code of Hammurabi, the Lawgiver of Babylon, and Egyptian civil law. So for Moses to come down from the mountain with only ten commandments and not one hundred was truly a revelation from God. The Law was perfect, flawless, and sure. Therefore, it was "written by the finger of God."

POETIC IDIOMS

Biblical, poetic language is intriguing. And even here, we find idiomatic colloquialisms that may be confusing if we understand them literally. For example, the author of Ecclesiastes pens an unforgettable passage of admonition to youth. What follows is that admonition. Note that I italicize and place the meanings of the colloquial expressions in brackets:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; . . . in the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble [*the legs begin to tremble*], and the strong men shall bow themselves [*the arms lose their strength*], and the grinders cease because they are few [*loss of teeth and the ability to chew*], and those that look out of the windows be darkened [*the eyes grow dim*].

¹⁰Ex. 31:18, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, [*the ears become so hard of hearing that the sound of women grinding at the mill is low*]. And he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low [*difficulty in distinguishing sounds and the songs of birds startles the individual*]. . . . And the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden [the Aramaic text reads: "and the locust shall multiply" —*your children shall multiply quickly and you will see your grandchildren and great grandchildren*]. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, [*before passions fade and life finishes*], or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel be broken at the cistern — [*before life ends, or before the loss of sexual potency and virility*].¹¹

Clearly, not only poor translations may have contributed to a misunderstanding of the Bible, but precise and literal translations may have created an equally difficult challenge for everyone. This is especially true when we do not allow for the many colorful idiomatic sayings present in the text.

HEBREW PROPHETS

The Hebrew prophets provide us with many more good examples of idiomatic terminology. The major prophets were diplomats who dearly loved their own nation, Israel, but were concerned about the welfare of other nations as well. Their task of pointing out the evils of their own people and government officials was quite a difficult one. To accomplish this, they made their revelations and declarations very graphic and impressive. Their style was terse, direct, and intense, with ideas skillfully couched in descriptive metaphors and idiomatic phrases.

¹¹Ecc. 12:1–6, KJV., also see Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, pp. 600–602.

These wise, ancient sages wanted the Hebrew people and not just their government officials to understand their ideas and messages. Therefore they used the common speech when they wrote. Because of their colloquial method of speaking and writing, the prophets were successful in conveying messages clearly to the ordinary individual of the Near East. However, it is difficult to understand this Semitic speech style especially for readers in the Western world.

Symbolism is another style of communication not often employed in the West. We find it quite a challenge to interpret prophecies clearly because of the frequent use of symbolism and vernacular peculiar to those ancient times. Many biblical authorities and laypersons take prophetic symbols literally. This results in various schools of interpretation and gives birth to much division among these groups.

PROPHETIC IDIOMS

What were some idiomatic phrases the prophets used in their writings? The following quotation from Isaiah illustrates several idioms, with the intended meaning included in the brackets:

For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon everyone that is proud and lofty . . . upon all the cedars of Lebanon. . . and upon the oaks of Bashan [*great, noble, strong, proud, and influential men*] . . . and upon all the hills that are lifted up [*smaller powers that have exalted themselves*].¹²

Again, this great statesman speaks idiomatically: "Cease ye from man whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of?"¹³ How does one avoid "man whose breath

¹²Isa. 2:12-14, KJV. See Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, p. 620.

¹³Isa. 2:22, KJV.

is in his nostrils"? We would have to avoid everyone if we were to understand the prophet's word literally. However, this idiom really means "avoid a man who is continually angry, explosive, and impulsive." This is an excellent piece of advice.

This famous and often-quoted prophecy of Isaiah contains many idioms that have unfortunately been interpreted in a literal sense.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling [in Aramaic, "ox"] together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed together; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like an ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp [in Aramaic, "serpent"], and the weaned child shall put his hand in the cockatrice's den [Aramaic, "asp's den"].¹⁴

Are we really to expect leadership from a small child? Will the animals of the earth truly undergo a change of nature? What do these prophetic idioms mean?

"A little child shall lead them" shows that political leadership will be in the hands of simple, sincere leaders rather than in the hands of shrewd and double-dealing men. No crooked politician who perverts justice and maintains a double standard of law and order will lead the people. And, though "a little child" is open and trusting, the idiomatic phrase does not mean that a simpleton will hold office. It will be a person of integrity with an inner understanding for all concerned.

The "sucking child playing with serpents" and the "weaned child putting his hand in the den of the asp" signify the power of *sincere* leaders who can negotiate with enemies (serpents and asps) of their country. It takes a sincere, persuasive person with a pure heart like a child to be able to

¹⁴Isa. 11:6-8, KJV.

move his enemy toward favoring his nation and averting war or conquest.

Prophets often used animals, especially the wild vicious predators that frequently terrorized small towns, to symbolize strong, powerful, dictatorial nations. The "wolf," "leopard," "lion," and "bear" refer to oppressive nations that seek to devour the helpless and defenseless nations. "Lamb," "kid," "calf," and "cow" symbolize weaker and smaller nations — nations that have no great military might or fortification.

All these animals, eating and dwelling together, and then a child leading them, means that strong nations will be in harmony with the defenseless nations. They will trade and be at peace with one another. "The lion shall eat straw like an ox" represents the day when powerful nations will be content with their own internal resources. They shall not seek "to eat" other nations by plundering them. Isaiah saw truth and justice pouring out to all nations because of the Messiah's leadership and teaching. The promised Messiah was to reveal truth, justice, and the law of God to all humankind so that peace and harmony might reign among the nations.

JESUS' USE OF IDIOMS

Jesus also used idiomatic expressions of speech when he taught all over Palestine. Let us examine some of these phrases from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Interestingly, in Aramaic the term "gospel" as the title for each account means the "preaching," "message," or "declaration" of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

Jesus says: "But whoever shall say, 'Thou fool' shall be in danger of hellfire."¹⁵ Can this really be so? Most of us at one

¹⁵Mt. 5:22, KJV.

time or another have referred to ourselves or others as "fools." And according to most of our English translations of Jesus' teaching, the use of this word would bring on "hellfire."

Gehenna dnoora, "hellfire," is an Aramaic idiom. It means "regret," "mental torment," "destruction." According to the Aramaic-speaking Church Fathers of the 2nd to 5th centuries, C.E., "hellfire" denoted torment of mind, *not an inferno* in which God burns people forever. Later the term "hell" became known as a designated place of punishment for the wicked and unbelievers. But among the early Eastern Church Fathers of Edessa and Nisibin, Mesopotamia, this doctrine was not prevalent.

HELL

What and where is "hell"? Some believe it is a subterranean torture pit in which living souls are burned in torment throughout eternity. Others teach that hell is a place of unending separation from the presence of God. These ideas of fire and punishment came from certain misunderstood biblical passages and from certain interpretations of the early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Augustine. Hell is not a place where God tortures "disobedient" humankind. Jesus never presented such an idea, nor was it a part of his teaching. When he used the Aramaic term *gehenna dnoora*, he spoke it idiomatically.

Our English word "hell" derives from the Anglo-Saxon *hel*, "a hidden place." *Hel* comes from *helan* and means "to hide." Unfortunately, biblical translators used only one English word, "hell," to render two distinct and entirely different Semitic terms—*sheol* and *gehenna dnoora*.

Sheol derives from the Hebrew *shalal*, "to be still or quiet." In the ancient days, the Hebrews believed that *sheol* was a place below the surface of the earth where the departed, both

good and bad, remained quiet and inactive. In *sheol* the departed waited for the judgment day. They also thought that God had no jurisdiction over *sheol*. The writers of the Tanakh (O.T.) employed this term in all their writings.

On the other hand, New Testament authors used *gehenna dnoora*. Although Jesus mostly used the term *gehenna*, at times he used *sheol*. *Gehenna dnoora* means "Valley of Hinnom," which was a place outside Jerusalem where the people burned rubbish. In the very ancient days, it was a place of sacrifice to the pagan Amonite god Molech.¹⁶

The name *gehenna* — *Gei Hinnom* in Hebrew — derives from the infamous valley of Ben Hinnom, southwest of Jerusalem.¹⁷ After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, Assyria made the southern kingdom of Judah pay tribute. 2 Chronicles 28 tells us that the Judean King Ahaz (735–715 B.C.E.) took some precious silver and gold temple ornaments to appease the King of Assyria. Ahaz worshiped and offered sacrifices to idols. In the valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem the King condemned his son to the flames as a sacrificial offering to pacify the gods.

It was because of these horrible atrocities and practices that the valley, *Gei Hinnom*, became a Hebrew term for "hell." During the time of the New Testament, the Hinnom valley became a place to burn rubbish and the bodies of plague victims.¹⁸

In New Testament times, *gehenna* suggested "regret," "remorse," "mental agony," and "mental suffering." This idiom should not be understood literally. Near Eastern, Aramaic-speaking early Church Fathers clearly understood the meaning

¹⁶See 2 Ki. 23:10, and 2 Chron. 33:6, KJV.

¹⁷See Jer. 19:2.

¹⁸Rocco A. Errico, *The Message of Matthew: An Annotated Parallel Aramaic-English Gospel of Matthew*, "Hellfire — Gehenna," p. A-17.

of this term. However, in the West we have interpreted "hell" literally and have, therefore, unwittingly misconstrued its meaning.

DIFFICULT ADMONITIONS

A well-known admonition from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is: "If thy right eye offends thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee, . . . and if thy right hand offends thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee."¹⁹ Jesus' words appear to be harsh and unfeeling. Truly, if we understand some of his words literally, we would be in a great deal of difficulty.

For example, according to Jesus, if you commit an offense with your hand, you should cut it off. Thank God, not many people have complied with this command. Nevertheless, a few have literally cut off their hands in obedience to his teaching.

In many Near Eastern countries where ancient laws are strictly upheld, those who are caught stealing have one hand cut off by the city officials. On the second offense, the remaining hand is also cut off. If there is a third offense, the officials remove the head. This greatly discourages stealing.

However, Jesus did not teach to sever the hand from one's body. His expression was a simple idiomatic phrase. He meant to cease from whatever evil your hand may be doing. The terms "to pluck out," "to cut off," suggest "stopping," "quitting," and "don't do it any more."

Jesus told his apostles that certain signs would follow those who believe in his name. "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name . . . they shall take up serpents;

¹⁹Mt. 5:29-30, KJV.

and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them. " ²⁰ With these encouraging declarations, Jesus empowered his disciples "to take up serpents" — that is, "to handle" fearlessly the challengers and enemies of his gospel. The great Master-Teacher inspired his disciples with divine wisdom. They would be able to give an answer to religious leaders, cunning officials, and those who opposed their master's message.

"Drinking poison without harm" refers to the power to overcome all malicious gossip and false accusations made against his disciples. They were not to be afraid of being maligned, for they would "drink it," that is, "withstand the onslaught of slander." No defamation could hurt them.

Jesus commanded his disciples "to remove mountains," "tread on serpents," and "cast out devils." "Removing mountains" means conquering severe obstacles and difficulties. "Treading on serpents" denotes conquering fear and overriding the power of one's enemies. "Casting out devils" refers to healing mental and emotional illnesses and certain physical ailments. Jesus' presence and teachings were so dynamic and uplifting to the consciousness of the apostles that they too would manifest the same transforming power as their teacher.

PAUL'S USE OF IDIOMS

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul says: "O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open to you, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels."²¹ Let us compare a translation of this verse from the Aramaic Peshitta text. "Our mouths are open toward you, Corinthians, and our hearts breathe freely. You are not

²⁰Mk. 16:17-18, KJV.

²¹2 Cor. 6:11-12, KJV.

compelled by us but are strongly urged by your tender compassion."²² Still, we wonder, exactly what does this verse really say?

Paul writes frankly when he uses the idiom "our mouths are open toward you." What he conveys is this: "We have told you everything." In the Near East, when an individual speaks candidly and clearly, others say that "he or she has a big [large] mouth." This is not a disapproving saying. It means that the person is direct with speech and will reveal everything. In our American idiom a person with a "big mouth" refers to one who can't keep a secret or who talks too much. But this is not true for the biblical meaning.

We have an identical idiom in the *Tanakh* (O.T.): And Hannah prayed, and she said, . . . My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation."²³ Although Hannah uses several Semitic idioms in her prayer of exaltation, we are interested only in the corresponding phrase from Corinthians. In the Aramaic text it reads: "And Hannah prayed and said: My mouth is opened against my enemies." ²⁴ Although this idiom is identical, its connotation differs.

Hannah had been deeply distressed for years because she bore no children. It is a horrible stigma for a married woman of the East to be childless. The Hebrews believed that any woman unable to bear a child was in divine disfavor. Since Hannah had been unable to conceive, her husband's other wife, Pannah, tormented and ridiculed her. Undoubtedly the women of the town gossiped about her.

However, after receiving a spoken blessing from Eli, the High Priest, Hannah gave birth to a son and named him

²²Errico translation.

²³1 Sam. 2:1, KJV.

²⁴Errico translation.

Samuel. After the birth of Samuel, she had many more children. Now the joyful woman cries, "My mouth is opened against my enemies." This means, "I can talk back to my tormentors who ridiculed me — God favors me — I've had a child." Thus, the Aramaic idiom "open mouth" has two meanings: "to talk back" and "to reveal everything."

Paul used several other idioms: "our hearts breathe freely" and "ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels." To have hearts "breathe freely" refers to a clear conscience. It also means to be relieved of any responsibility. In the final idiom, "bowels" is a literal translation. Therefore, its literal rendering obscures the meaning of the text.

The apostle uses *rahma*, but this word has at least a dozen English equivalents. Literally the word means "friends," "bowels," "womb," "bladder," "testicles," and the "female sexual organs." However, *rahma* metaphorically signifies "love," "mercy," "kindness," "affection," "compassion," "benevolence," "friendliness," and "tenderheartedness." Here, in this verse, the intended meaning is "compassion."

Where else in Scripture did the translators literally render *rahma* as "bowels"? Paul in his letter to the Philippians tenderheartedly says: "For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ."²⁵ However, in Aramaic it reads: "Surely God is my witness as to what manner I fiercely love you all through the tender love of Jesus the Messiah."²⁶

Isaiah, communing with *Yahweh* God, prays: "Look down from heaven . . . Where is thy zeal and thy strength, the sounding of thy bowels and thy mercies toward me? Are they

²⁵Phil. 1:8, KJV.

²⁶Errico translation.

restrained?"²⁷ "The sounding of bowels" means "tender affection and love." Isaiah really says: ". . . turn your tender affections and love upon me."

In another passage, the prophetic statesman announces: "Wherefore my bowels shall sound [talk] like a harp for Moab."²⁸ "My heart shall sorrow over Moab" is the prophet's real meaning.²⁹

The poetic book of love, The Song of Solomon, says: "My beloved put his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him."³⁰ Again the literal translation is not clear. What the lover says is: "and my passions stirred because of him."

SATAN

This section of the idioms will not deal with the origin of the Devil. Chapter 6, "Symbolism," explores the origin of Lucifer. Our segment here investigates the idiomatic use of "satan" and "devil."

The Aramaic language and its idioms clarify one of the most misunderstood subjects in the Bible — the malevolent force known as "Satan." New Testament writers extensively employ idiomatic expressions such as "Satan," "Devil," "evil spirit," "unclean spirit" and other similar terms. Although there are a few such references in the *Tanakh* (O.T.), it is Jesus and the apostles who use these terms most frequently.

In our own English language we also use similar expressions involving "devilish" terms. Here are just a few

²⁷Isa. 63:15, KJV.

²⁸Isa. 16:11, KJV.

²⁹See Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, p. 648.

³⁰Song of Sol. 5:4, KJV.

examples: "the devil with you!" "deviled ham," "he's got the devil in his eye," "there will be the devil to pay," "he (or she) is devilish," or, jokingly "You devil you!" We say these idiomatic phrases with no thought of a supernatural being. Again we turn to the apostle Paul. This time we look into his second letter to the Corinthians.

A THORN IN THE FLESH

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."³¹ Wherever Paul traveled, he met constant opposition and verbal attacks against his apostolic authority. Evidently, after he preached in certain areas, false teachers arrived, accusing him of disreputable leadership, and undermining his apostleship. These accusations aggravated Paul and were a continual source of irritation — "a thorn in the flesh."³² Many passages of Scripture refer to the idiom "thorn." For several examples see Gen. 3:18, Num. 33:55, Judges 2:3, and Josh. 22:13.

The phrase "a messenger of Satan to buffet me" is a further explanation of "thorn in the flesh." It means "a troublemaker." In modern English, Paul would have said: "I'm plagued with troublemakers." "Satan's messenger" denotes a fraudulent, deceptive teacher who misleads the people through beguiling philosophies and teachings. However, it means a satanic messenger (deceiver, troublemaker) reporting malicious talk that was hurting Paul's reputation.

³¹2 Cor. 12:7, KJV.

³²See Lamsa, *New Testament Commentary*, pp. 315–16.

DELIVERED UNTO SATAN

In a letter to Timothy, Paul says: ". . . of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."³³ The Semitic expression "to deliver [people] unto Satan" means "to turn them over to their own devices," or "to let them stew in their own juices." Another saying in English that conveys the same meaning is: "Give them enough rope and they will hang themselves."³⁴

Paul uses this identical saying in his first letter to the Corinthians. The apostle comments on a report of immorality which reached him and says: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. . . . in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."³⁵

This charge of immorality against a son who slept with one of his father's wives was a serious indictment. (Bear in mind that polygamy was common in the Near East.) Paul's command to gather in Jesus' name and deliver the man to Satan so that "the spirit may be saved" is difficult to comprehend.

Understanding that the Aramaic Semitic idiom "to deliver to satan" means "to let the individual stew in his own juices" helps clarify this saying. In other words, the individual is to "stew" in his own misdeeds and suffer the consequences.

³³1 Tim. 1:20, KJV.

³⁴For more insight on this biblical verse, see Lamsa, *New Testament Commentary*, p. 406.

³⁵1 Cor. 5:1-5, KJV.

A similar English idiom would be "let him go to hell." But why did Paul give such a strong imperative? Had he no pity?

On the contrary, this is why the last part of the verse reads "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Apparently, some people only learn their lessons through suffering brought on by their own harmful actions. Thus, after reaching a certain level in their self-destructive habits, they wake up and cease their deleterious deeds. That is, they can turn from their harmful acts and find salvation from further evil and suffering.³⁶

THE TERM "DEVIL"

Seventy-five percent of the time, the New Testament refers to the term "devil" as "crazy" or "insane" and not as a supernatural creature. In the Near East, the general populace calls an insane person or a crazy action a "devil." For instance, the Hebrews considered idol worship as devil worship. They believed it was "crazy," "insane" to worship an idol. They reasoned that since man made idols, there could be no life in them. Yet people venerated, bowed to, and kissed lifeless statues of stone and wood. To the Hebrews this was "crazy" and, therefore, "devil worship."

According to the gospel of John, certain religious authorities became angry with Jesus and accused him of being a crazy and unfaithful Jew. "Say we not well, that thou art a Samaritan and that thou hast a devil?"³⁷

People of that time considered those with mental and emotional illnesses to be "devils" or "devil-possessed." Since the mentally and emotionally disturbed did not behave normally,

³⁶See Lamsa, *More Light on the Gospel*, p. 202.

³⁷Jn. 8:48, KJV.

people said they had "evil spirits" or "unclean spirits." People also thought that individuals with uncontrollable tempers were "demon-possessed." Often, Jesus spoke to and cured these "devils" that is, those with mental disorders. One man told Jesus that his name was "Legion." This means that he had many "devils," i.e., he had many things wrong with him.

Scripture says that Mary of Magdala had "seven devils." In the Near East "seven" is a sacred number and it suggests "totality," "completeness." Thus, Mary of Magdala was really "into" her erroneous ways. Her bad habits were *totally* destructive.

Truthfully, Mary would not need "seven devils" to do a destructive job. One would be sufficient. Then again, "seven devils" imply seven crazy attitudes or seven detrimental habits. Mary needed help and Jesus healed her. Gratitude filled her heart and she became a devotee of Jesus and his teaching.

Undoubtedly, Jesus' presence manifested itself in a powerfully magnetic and dynamic manner. His demeanor and peacefulness exerted a strong influence over those who were physically and mentally ill. He had absolute confidence in the healing and restorative spiritual forces that reside in people.

Luke's gospel tells us about the seventy disciples returning to Jesus after a successful healing mission. They were exuberantly joyful because the sick responded to their healing ministry. They said to him: "Our lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name."³⁸ "Through thy name" means that the disciples used Jesus' method of healing.

TO FALL FROM HEAVEN

Jesus rejoiced over the success of his disciples: "I beheld

³⁸Lk. 10:17, KJV.

Satan as lightning fall from heaven."³⁹ This is also idiomatic speech. It means "I saw truth conquering evil." The phrase "to fall from heaven" in Semitic terms signifies "losing one's power and influence."

Isaiah's prophetic statement to the king of Babylon declares: "How are you fallen from heaven," showing that the monarch would lose his kingdom.⁴⁰ Similarly, "to rise to heaven" means to gain in power and influence. Jesus knew his powerful truth would triumph over all so-called "evil" forces and influences. The word of truth, love, and power filled his simple disciples. This was the transforming source that changed the hearts and minds of the people. These disciples evidenced that the kingdom of God had assuredly come on earth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Recognizing and understanding idioms in any language is very important. If one truly wants to communicate well and to comprehend what others mean, knowing idioms is essential. This principle applies to holy Scripture as well. Now we can see how vital the Second Key is in unlocking many biblical passages. For more studies on idioms, I recommend Dr. George M. Lamsa's *Idioms in the Bible Explained*.⁴¹ Let us now continue to the Third Key — Mysticism.

³⁹Lk. 10:18, KJV.

⁴⁰See Isa. 14:12-22.

⁴¹See Bibliography: Lamsa.

CHAPTER 3

The Third Key Mysticism

What is mysticism? The word itself derives from "mystery," "secret." A dictionary definition of the term "mysticism" is as follows: "A spiritual discipline aiming at direct union or communion with reality or God through deep meditation or contemplation."¹

Let me define mysticism another way. Mysticism is knowledge gained through subjective, intuitive experience. It is a way of *knowing* that goes beyond ordinary circumstances, persons, places, and things. In other words, it is *knowledge* discerned through transcendental realizations.

Through this specialized, heightened awareness we can sense the ordinary world from a more sensitive position and metaphysical perspective. Philosophical terminology refers to this level of perception or consciousness as a "noumenon."

Scripture reports many mystical episodes. In my approach to biblical mysticism I have categorized it into two types. One form I have called mundane mysticism and the other is an inner, spiritual form of mysticism.

MUNDANE MYSTICISM

According to 1 Samuel 9:1–20, a young Israelite of the Benjamite clan named Saul was searching for his father's donkeys. They had searched for a very long time but he and his servant could not find them. So they decided to seek help from

¹American Heritage Dictionary.

the local seer, Samuel. Now, before Saul and his servant could even question the prophet, Samuel told them that someone had found their donkeys and brought them to Saul's father. However, circumstances had changed because Saul's father was now worried about him and his servant. Samuel was clairvoyant and therefore, through his inner sight, he could *know* the whereabouts of the animals. The psychic sensitivity of this Hebrew seer (who was also the last of the Judges in Israel) solved a mundane problem for Saul and his servant.

INNER SPIRITUAL MYSTICISM

The books of the prophets give us good examples of the second type of mysticism, spiritual guidance. These prophets helped direct their nation through perilous times. They also told their dreams and visions to the kings of Israel and Judah so that these monarchs might be guided morally and politically. Through the prophets' inner sensitivity to the moral climate and spiritual fiber of their nation, they could discern what kind of discipline and correction was needed.

DREAMS AND VISIONS

Dreams, visions, and revelation play a major role in the Bible. For instance, when God revealed Himself to the patriarchs, prophets, and kings, He usually did so through dreams, visions, and revelation. How do we know this? Scripture attests to the idea in various biblical passages. However, I do not imply that dreams and visions were the only means of spiritual guidance and communication.

In the book of Job the writer tells us: "For God speaks once, he does not speak a second time; *through a dream and through a vision of the night*, when sleep falls upon men, while

in deep slumber upon the bed, then he opens the ears of men, and humbles them according to their rebelliousness."²

Moses also explains to us the method by which God made Himself known to the prophets: "And the Lord [Yahweh] said to them, Hear now my words: If you are prophets I the Lord [Yahweh] *will reveal myself to you in a vision and I will speak to you in a dream.*"³

The Psalmist declares: "For the Lord [Yahweh] is our hope; and the Holy One of Israel is our King. Then He spoke *in visions* to His pious one, and He said . . ."⁴

When King Solomon prayed for wisdom, the scribe who chronicled the King's reign reports: "In Gibeon the Lord (Yahweh) appeared to Solomon *in a dream* by night and God said, Ask that I shall give thee."⁵ Many other verses also attest to dreams and visions as some of the ways God communicated with his people.

Dr. George M. Lamsa claimed that 40 percent of the Bible is based on dreams, visions, and revelations. The astounding appearances of God and angels (messengers) usually occurred in the minds of the Hebrew people while they were sleeping or in a trance. All biblical prophets received spiritual ideas and illumination through dreams and visions.

As far as we know, none of the early Hebrew patriarchs carried any holy books with them for guidance or instruction. According to the biblical stories, the Word of God manifested itself in the hearts of these patriarchs via dreams and visions. Thus, the Bible contains the patriarchs' *living* encounters with spiritual forces. The Spirit of truth wrote on the "tables of their hearts" and not just on the "skins of sheep."

²Job 33:14-16, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

³Num. 12:6, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁴Ps. 89:18-19, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁵1 Ki. 3:5, KJV.

The gospel writers report that Jesus himself relied on the writings of the prophets to guide him through his role as Messiah (Christ). These authors narrate that Jesus quoted Isaiah more than any other prophet. The Messiah studied the prophecies of Isaiah and patterned his life according to the dreams and outlook of this great prophet and leader.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD "DREAM"

Our English word "dream" comes from Medieval English and early Teutonic roots and means "to deceive." But in all three Semitic tongues, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic, the root of the word has an amazingly different meaning.

Helma, "dream," derives from *hlm* and means "to heal," "to make well or whole," and "to integrate." In other words, when the ancient Semitic people used the word "dream," they were attempting to explain the strange phenomenon that occurs during sleep. Evidently they understood the process to be some sort of healing, guiding, and integrating mechanism of the mind, as many psychologists and psychiatrists of today have recognized.

KEY EXPRESSIONS

When we study the Bible, how do we discern whether we are reading a mystical incident or a historical event? There are key phrases that can help us recognize the difference between a psychic happening and a purely physical episode. In many scriptural passages, the writers plainly say that the occurrence is a dream or a vision. Sometimes an author may not explicitly say so, but will use one of the following expressions:

The angel of the Lord [Yahweh] *appeared*. . . .

I was in the Spirit [trance]. . . .

The Spirit of the Lord [Yahweh] was upon me. . . .
The Word of the Lord [Yahweh] came to me saying, and
I saw. . . .
The Lord [Yahweh] God appeared to Moses in. . . .

There are also times when no specific key phrase introduces a psychic experience. When this occurs, the only way to discern the happening is to realize: Whenever God and men, angels and men, or God and angels are holding a conversation, we may safely interpret the incident as a dream, vision, or revelation.

Interestingly, the word "to appear," *ethgli* in Aramaic, means "to come by revelation." *Eth* indicates "to come," and *gli* signifies "to reveal," "to unveil," and "to uncover." Therefore, it means "to come in a vision or a dream," especially with a preceding phrase such as "and the angel of the Lord appeared." One may also translate this biblical phrase: "and the messenger of Yahweh came by revelation to. . . ."

We are ready to begin studying some passages of the Bible that possibly have been understood as literal events rather than as visions or dreams.

ABRAHAM

Genesis, Chapter 22, describes a severe test that was put to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham. "And it came to pass after these things that *God did tempt* Abraham. . . . And He said take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love. . . . And offer him there for a burnt offering. . . ."⁶

This is very difficult to understand. It also raises a few questions in our minds. Does God *tempt* His faithful devotees?

⁶Gen. 22:1-2, KJV.

Was God interested in human sacrifice? Was the God of Abraham just like the other gods of Canaan who demanded human sacrifice⁷ for appeasement?

James (Jacob⁸), the brother of Jesus, writes in his epistle the following: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God *cannot be tempted with evil, neither does He tempt any man*."⁹ How is it that James (Jacob) says that God does not tempt a human being and yet the author of Genesis says that "God did tempt Abraham"? Many modern interpreters believe that this episode was simply a story and that none of it ever happened. In other words, it is just a traditional narrative with a religious purpose.

Aramaic-speaking Church Fathers concluded that this

⁷"Human sacrifice" or, in particular, *child sacrifice* was one of the appalling abuses in the ancient world. The horrifying truth is that the history of religions attests to human sacrifice in a number of places. The Phoenicians, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the peoples of Egypt, Canaan, and Greece practiced child sacrifice. However, historians inform us that it scarcely ever occurs in primitive religions, but almost exclusively in the higher and more developed. For an understanding of the idea of human sacrifice I recommend reading James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991. Evidently, human sacrifice prevailed only for limited periods; animal sacrifice replaced human oblation. Nonetheless, animal sacrifice is also an abuse. Ex. 22:29 and 34:10 command the sacrifice of the firstborn male (child sacrifice). Yet, at that same time the *Torah* abolishes the sacrifice of the firstborn through redeeming — Ex. 34:20; 13:13. The law sanctioned animals as a substitution.

⁸In the Aramaic Peshitta text there is no such name as James. The Semitic New Testament text reads the name "James" as "Jacob." Translators made a mistake when they rendered the name *Yacob* as "James." The name "James" was unknown in biblical Semitic languages. See my book *The Message of Matthew: An Annotated Parallel Aramaic-English Gospel of Matthew*, p. 38, footnote 5 — "Jacob."

⁹James 1:13, KJV.

was Abraham's vision.¹⁰ Abraham believed that God wanted his son as a sacrifice. However, as the dream progressed, he learned that God does not need or demand human oblation. The dream taught Abraham never to practice rites of child-sacrifice. He learned that when put to the test, he would obey God above all else. Israel passed this lesson on to its future generations.

We must also keep in mind that then there were no holy books or written laws among the Hebrews. Father Abraham was guiding his tribal people by his spiritually informative dreams. Primarily, the biblical author narrates Abraham's visions and dreams¹¹ and not just the patriarch's chronological, historical life-events. It is Abraham's spiritual encounters and relationship with God that the author highlights.

MAR NARSAI

Mar Narsai, an Aramaic-speaking Church Father, tells us in his commentaries that God appeared to the patriarchs and prophets in dreams and visions. This great teacher belonged to the Aramaic branch of the early Christian Church. He was a theologian, prolific writer, and scriptural commentator. The probable date of his birth was 399 C.E. This outstanding teacher became the head of the famous Aramaic Bible School of Edessa.

Mar Narsai, because of his knowledge of the Aramaic

¹⁰Schools of Biblical and Historical Criticism did not exist at this time. These Eastern Church Fathers never doubted or questioned Abraham's actual existence. They believed that God communicated in revelation (visions and dreams) to the patriarchs.

¹¹It is interesting to note that even when Israel was in possession of the *Torah*, dreams and visions were guiding the great seers and prophets of Israel.

language, customs, manners, metaphors, and allegories, could explain many difficult scriptural passages. He was aware that certain biblical narratives were not history as we understand it, but were recorded dreams and visions of the patriarchs and prophets.

What follows is a translation from the writings of Mar Narsai. It is a literal rendering from Aramaic texts. I have also added a few English words put in brackets to help clarify certain sentences. It is an explanation of Abraham's vision of God.

GOD'S APPEARANCE TO ABRAHAM

In a still vision He [God] revealed His will to His beloved friend. And he conversed with Him pleasantly according to his understanding. . . .

It was not by the means of something expected but *in a vision* and as the appearance of a man that Abraham saw God and he [Abraham] received Him in his house as a man who can be seen. As a man, he received Him and not humanly because it is impossible to see God with the human eye. It was not God's [spiritual] nature that Abraham saw *in his vision* but in a mystery he conversed with His body alone. Yet Abraham could not see it in reality.

It was not reality which took place in the house of Abraham, but rather mystery which cannot be explained by those who are endowed only by the power of speech. The nature of God cannot be described by those who are endowed by the power of speech alone. Thus what is written cannot be described literally.

It was not [in a] corporeal [sense] that Abraham refreshed [God] with eating and drinking. . . . It was figurative all that took place in that *revelation* with Abraham, a human vision, human speech and human food. God performed all of this very wisely as is the custom of his power to perform in all

generations.¹²

THREE MESSENGERS DINE WITH ABRAHAM

The meeting of the three strangers and Abraham in the 18th chapter of Genesis is very human, heart-warming, and typically Near Eastern in its narration. Again, we interpret this episode as a vision (dream) of Abraham. Interestingly, not only did Aramaic-speaking Church Fathers understand this passage as a vision, but the famous Jewish teacher Maimonides also understood the entire episode to have been a vision.¹³

Abraham sat by the tent door in the heat of the day. According to the custom, Easterners relax and recline in the hot hours of early afternoon. Usually work ceases from noon until it cools in late afternoon. Tribal chiefs recline on the shady side of their tents or at the door to enjoy the breeze. Abraham had fallen asleep and, in a vision, saw three men standing at a distance from him.¹⁴ Again, we are dealing with a custom.

Often desert chiefs will suddenly appear at another's dwelling without being announced. Apparently, these three were on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah (Amorrah). Now it was growing late, so Abraham, in an Eastern manner, approached the three men. He begged them seven times to refresh

¹²The writings of Mar Narsai translated by the author.

¹³Modern biblical scholars do not interpret this episode as a dream. They strictly see it as a traditional, religious, literary piece.

¹⁴Certain scholars interpret the three men as Yahweh God and two messengers. When reading Chapter 18 one naturally receives this impression. However, modern interpretation accepts that the narrative is an editorial reworking. The original just had the idea of three men visiting Abraham and bestowing the news and blessing of the coming child. Later editorial work added the idea of a theophany: "And Yahweh appeared to him [Abraham]. . . ." Gen. 18:1. Nevertheless, the *Torah* as we now have it has Abraham communing with the Lord (Yahweh) God as one of the men.

themselves. He had them rest under the shade of the tree so that he might have their feet washed. And he had his servants bring some water and a morsel of bread to sustain their hearts. Abraham served them cakes from the griddle, veal, and some buttermilk.¹⁵

Then as a gift for his fine hospitality, the Lord God revealed to Abraham that he and his wife Sarah were to have a child in about a year. Sarah, who was hiding by the tent door and listening to the conversation, laughed when she heard God make the announcement that she was to have a child. Obviously, the Lord heard Sarah laughing and immediately called her to come forward. He questioned her about her laughter. She quickly denied that she had laughed. Sarah was embarrassed. Nonetheless, the Lord God assured her she was going to have a child anyway!

The simplicity and warmth of this story depicts the type of relationship which existed between Abraham and his God. Can you imagine yourself daydreaming about the Lord God of heaven and earth sitting and dining with you? And then you would continue to dream that your wife laughed at his announcement? It is no wonder that Scripture refers to Abraham as a "friend of God." This was not a relationship of fear. It was a relationship of inner reverence, friendship, and a strong bond of love.

The inner workings of Abraham's soul are clearly revealed to us through his dreams and visions. By studying these dreams we see the consciousness of Abraham growing in many ways. His dreams are very commonplace, plain, and direct. Thus, the mysticism we find in Abraham's life is not that of mystery and dark sayings. His revelations were clear and uncomplicated.

¹⁵Some Bible commentators believe it was yogurt.

MOSES

According to the biblical story, the daughter of Pharaoh raised Moses in the magnificent land and fabulous courts of Egypt. Therefore the revelations of this great lawgiver and prophet have the touch of Egyptian splendor and majesty. God appears to Moses in a burning bush. Then God tells him to remove his shoes from his feet, for the ground on which he stood was holy.

In Moses' revelations we come to realize that he is acting as God's counselor. On the other hand, God is the great Monarch needing advice from His wise advisor. This is why we find so many recorded events of conversations between God and Moses very intriguing. Nonetheless, why would God take advice from Moses? The answer is simple. These are the revelations of Moses as told by the biblical author.

There is an amazing and incredible passage in the book of Exodus, Chapter 33, verses 1-4, where God wants to relinquish leadership. Yahweh God as a mighty King calls Moses up into the mountain and speaks to him saying:

. . . Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land which I swore unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, Unto thy seed will I give it; And I will send an angel before thee; and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite; unto a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people, lest I consume thee in the way. And when the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned; and no man did put on him his ornaments.¹⁶

Moses' exchange with Yahweh God was a special form

¹⁶Ex. 33:1-4, KJV.

of communication, a direct revelation. Nonetheless, the revelation did come in a form of vision. God appeared to Moses in various places at different times. We need to understand that a theophany (God's appearance) comes through an altered state of consciousness — a vision. The difference between Moses' revelations and those of others is that God spoke to Moses "face to face." That is, God's messages to Moses were always obvious, candid, and free of cryptic utterances. And, no doubt, Moses often heard God's voice only, for no vision was necessary.

We must not misunderstand the conversation between Moses and God. In actuality God was not angry or discouraged. The author has written the episode this way for a reason. Let's look at the text.

It seems to say that God is worn out and disgusted with Israel's unruly, rebellious, and disobedient behavior. He is so incensed by the twelve tribes that He has decided not to go with them into Palestine. He also places the blame on Moses for bringing the people out of Egypt. The Lord wanted Moses to bear the responsibility of leading these (according to this passage) obstinate, "stiffnecked" people into the Promised Land. In other words, God seems to be admitting that even He cannot continue to guide and govern such a stubborn people.

Later in the episode Moses implores God to go with Israel. Although God has assured Moses of sending an "angel" — i.e., messenger — to take His place, Moses is unwilling to continue without Yahweh Himself. Finally, God consents to go.

Is this possible? Was the Creator of the universe angry, helpless, and unable to rule His people? Looking only on the surface of the incident, God appears as a weak and discouraged leader. However, many other scriptural passages teach us that God is not weak, nor is there anything which is impossible for the Creator.

Biblical writers were skilled at delivering spiritual ideas in human terms. They often characterized God as a shepherd

feeding his flock or as an eagle protecting little ones under its wings. Sometimes they described God as angry, happy, sorry or disappointed.

On this occasion the author depicts God as very angry, so that one can see how extremely difficult it was for Moses to guide and discipline these tribal people during the exodus and trek through the desert. We must keep in mind that in those days it took a tremendous amount of courage and powerful leadership to unite twelve rival Semitic tribes.¹⁷ According to biblical history, intertribal rivalry continued among the Israelites until the Assyrians carried away ten of the twelve tribes into the North.

What an unforgettable legacy this biblical passage was for the descendants of Israel — describing Israel's ancestors as being so obstinate that even God could not take it! This was a valuable lesson for future generations so that they would not repeat the patterns and disobey God's laws.

JOSHUA

Yahweh God said to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses' minister: "Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel."¹⁸ Yahweh made Himself known to Joshua through visions and dreams, leading and guiding him as the captain of the hosts with a drawn sword, just like any other military leader.

And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand, and

¹⁷That is, the twelve tribes of Israel.

¹⁸Josh. 1:2 KJV.

Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries? And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord [Yahweh] am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant?¹⁹

Dreams and visions guided almost all the leaders in Israel. There were: Deborah, the prophetess; Samson's mother; Gideon; the boy Samuel; Nathan; and many other prophets who guided the kings in Israel. Let us now consider two major Hebrew prophets, Jonah and Ezekiel.

JONAH

Some prophets warned of impending wars and others told of major political events. Then again, other prophets, like Jonah, received revelation that helped expand Israel's religious conscience. "Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me."²⁰

The prophet Jonah made his appearance some time during the 8th century B.C.E. However, no biblical authority knows the true dating for this prophet. Furthermore, among biblical scholars this prophetic story is the subject of much critical debate. These experts pose various interpretations and raise many questions too numerous to mention. Whatever the present state of biblical criticism concerning this prophetic book, Jonah had received revelation — a divine commission to go to Nineveh, the Capitol of Assyria. He had to predict its downfall.

Instead of obeying the voice, Jonah boarded a ship at

¹⁹Josh. 5:13-14, KJV.

²⁰Jonah 1:1-2, KJV.

Joppa. He had hoped to flee to Spain, but a mighty storm occurred at sea, and the ship and all aboard were in grave danger. The crew, being fearful, drew lots to see why this terrible fate had befallen them. Of course, the lot fell upon Jonah.

After the crew interrogated the prophet, the sailors became even more fearful. Every man on the ship tried to bring the vessel back to land, but to no avail. Finally, Jonah instructed the crew to throw him overboard. They prayed that God would not hold this awful deed they were about to do against them. Then they threw the prophet into the raging sea. Immediately a fish that God had appointed gulped Jonah down. While imprisoned in the belly of the fish, he prayed and repented. Suddenly the Lord God had the fish regurgitate, and up came Jonah onto the dry land.

He was ready to go to Nineveh. When he arrived in this great city, he made his predictions to the Assyrians and told them of the impending disaster. The Ninevites repented of their wrongs, and God spared the city. Because of God's lovingkindness, Jonah's prophecy of destruction did not happen. This greatly disturbed the prophet because it made him appear as a false seer. The truth is that Jonah had suspected all along that God's mercy, compassion, and graciousness might be bestowed upon the Assyrians. And this is exactly what God did for the Ninevites.²¹

Bible students usually ask this question concerning the prophet: "Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale?" Clearly, it is the New Testament that uses the term "whale" and not the Hebrew Bible. Scripture says: "Now the Lord had prepared a *great fish* to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."²²

²¹See Jonah 4:1-3.

²²Jonah 1:17, KJV.

First, it is necessary to establish the theme of Jonah's message. It doesn't matter whether one considers the account as a dream, parable, story, parody, or as an actual event in the prophet's life. Its theme was to reveal the universal presence of God — that is, God's mercy and care are for all nations. God is not exclusive, but all-inclusive. He always wants justice, love, peace, and forgiveness for all humankind despite nationality.

Second, the phrase "the word of the Lord came to Jonah" suggests that this episode was a vision. In the story Jonah was to learn a valuable lesson. He would transcend both nationalism and contemporary Hebrew beliefs. Jonah's vision (or story) would be the means through which Israel would come to a greater understanding of God. And not only would Israel learn this idea, but anyone who would read this powerful revelation would benefit from its teaching.

According to Near Eastern interpretation, Jonah's narrative was a vision and not a document describing factual events. Jonah's experiences aboard the ship headed for Tarshish (Spain), his appointment with a fish, and his lesson in Nineveh were visions. Hebrew scribes recorded this revelation to teach a very specific lesson for Israel.

Many Bible readers have wondered how Jonah could have known that three days and nights had passed while he was inside the fish. He couldn't see the sun rise or set! Nor did he have any timepiece. All this is a good indication that the event was not an actual happening.

Another helpful key point to consider is that according to Eastern dream interpretation, a fish symbolizes trouble or sorrow. Interestingly, the name *Nineveh* derives from the fish god *Ninos*. The ancient Assyrians worshiped the fish as one of their gods.²³ "To be in a fish" is a Semitic idiom and means "to be in a quandary" or "in a dilemma." Even to this day, Eastern

²³See George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, pp. 793–95.

people often say: "He is in the bottom of the sea"; and in some Aramaic dialects, people say: "He is in the ear of a fish." Our English equivalent to describe Jonah's plight would be, "He is in a pickle," "in a jam," "in hot water," or "He is in over his head."

Again, some modern interpreters look upon Jonah's writing as a parable or an allegory. They also believe that there is another hand at work in this book with much editing and additional material. Nevertheless, be it a dream, parable, or a reworked literary piece, its message is what counts. Near Eastern authorities consider parables to be much more graphic, forceful, and appealing than a plain statement of doctrine. No matter how one may interpret this story, the essential teaching is that the Gentiles are also deserving of God's love, care, and forgiveness. Any nation practicing justice, mercy, compassion, and understanding, and that recognizes their wrongdoing and makes amends, follows the central premise of the *Torah*.

EZEKIEL

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the *heavens were opened*, and *I saw visions of God*. In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, *the word of the Lord [Yahweh] came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest*.²⁴

There are three phrases here that introduce the mystical episode in Ezekiel's prophecy: "*heavens were opened*," "*I saw visions of God*," and "*the word of the Lord [Yahweh] came*." In Semitic languages, "the heavens were opened" is an expression one finds quite frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible and the

²⁴Ezk. 1:1-3, KJV.

New Testament. It means a "revelation," a "disclosure."

While he was a captive in Babylon by the river Chebar, some strange creatures visited Ezekiel in a vision. The prophet looked and beheld:

... a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire unfolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And everyone had four faces, and everyone had four wings. . . . As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.²⁵

These verses have led to many unusual conclusions. Some believe that Ezekiel was seeing a jet airliner, and others believed he was describing a UFO. All these ideas aside, surely Ezekiel was seeing something that had relevance for his people. What were these strange creatures, and what was the meaning of this phenomenon? What were the events that led to this mysterious vision?

Jeremiah and Ezekiel had predicted that the Chaldean armies would conquer and destroy Jerusalem. These two courageous men of God had disagreed with the policy of the court prophets in Jerusalem because it favored an alliance with Egypt, Syria, and other adjacent countries. The kings of Judah did not know which way to turn. The state was weak and caught between two powerful imperial nations.

When Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, discovered that the state of Judah had broken its alliance with him by making a secret treaty with Egypt, he invaded Palestine. King

²⁵Ezk. 1:4-10, KJV.

Nebuchadnezzar's armies captured Jerusalem, dethroned Jehoiachin, and replaced him with one of his brothers. During this invasion the armies carried away many princes, generals, men of nobility, and artists. Then suddenly the news came that Egyptian troops were marching into Palestine, and Nebuchadnezzar's forces had to retreat.

False court prophets in Judah mocked both Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These court deceivers firmly believed that the King of Babylon would not be victorious, although Ezekiel was certain Nebuchadnezzar would return and conquer all Palestine. Now it was at this crucial period, when Ezekiel was a prisoner of the invading Chaldean army, that the "strange creatures" made their appearance. This vision was an omen of the impending final disaster that was to befall both Palestine and Egypt.

In his vision he saw the strange creatures come out of a whirlwind. They were shaped like some kind of vehicle with wings and wheels. On the rims of the wheels were human eyes, and under the wings were human hands. The creatures had four faces — those of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. They had many other distinctive features as well.²⁶

These creatures symbolize the greatest war machine ever mobilized in the history of the ancient world. Nebuchadnezzar was preparing to march against Judah and Egypt for the second time. The wings of the creatures denoted the speed of the invading cavalry, riding Arabian horses which were swift as eagles.

"When the living creatures were lifted up from the ground, the wheels were lifted up with them," says the prophet. This means that when the cavalry went forward, the infantry followed. "Their rims were full of eyes" shows intelligence. That is, strategists, astrologers, engineers, soothsayers and other

²⁶For more details, see Ezk., Chapter 1.

men who were trained in tactical warfare guided the army.

"Wherever the spirit was to go, they went, . . . " symbolizes that wherever the intelligence officers directed the invading forces to go they would go. "And they went everyone straight forward, . . . " tells that they would not retreat. This army would not change its direction until complete victory was attained.

The face of a man again refers to "intellect." That of a lion symbolizes "dominion." The ox denotes "endurance" and "strength"; the eagle depicts "speed" and "omnipresence."

Ezekiel's vision revealed that though the King of Babylon had retreated after his first invasion, he was not defeated. To the contrary, he was making even greater preparations to carry out his threat against the nations beyond the river Euphrates. He was preparing an army with supplies and water that would last for years. When the second invasion did come, Babylonian forces slew Pharaoh Neco and captured Jerusalem. He carried away the rich treasury, burned the city, and uprooted the holy temple just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel had predicted. Thus the vision had meaning for the people in those days. The prophetic insight served as a warning so that Israel might prepare and avoid being caught between two great powers, Egypt and Babylon (Chaldea).²⁷

NEW TESTAMENT

Let us now move on to the New Testament. The first episode of mysticism we encounter is the annunciation, the appearance of Gabriel to Mary the mother of Jesus. What is most interesting here is that the angel's visitation to Mary is not an unusual occurrence in the Near East, even to this very day.

²⁷See George M. Lamsa *Old Testament Light*, pp. 793-95.

Married women who have a difficult time in conceiving generally make a special pilgrimage to certain shrines, holy places, churches, mosques, sacred hills, or any place where they might feel the presence of God. They must know that God will answer their request. According to the custom, they will wait until "a presence" reveals itself — i.e., a sign appears in a dream or a vision.

Usually an angel or a patron saint will appear in a dream and announce that the petitioners will conceive. Then, the messenger in the dream may also name the child that is to be born. This occurrence still happens in many places today in the Near East where ancient customs are still carried out.²⁸

According to the gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, the same Gabriel that came to Daniel and then later to Muhammad. "Gabriel" in Aramaic means "man of God." "Angel" means "counselor," "messenger," or metaphorically "God's thought." An angel is the presence of God counseling an individual who may be receiving the dream or vision.

THE VISITATION

The first chapter of Luke's gospel tells of the angelic visitation to Mary. "Now in the sixth month the messenger Gabriel was sent from God to Galilee, to the city named Nazareth."²⁹ However, there are a few matters for us to understand before we proceed any further. First, we must realize that we are faced with Eastern mysticism. Second, we must also recognize that Mary was in an altered state of consciousness when the appearance took place.

²⁸See Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 12-13.

²⁹Lk. 1:26, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

Luke continues his narrative telling us: "And upon entering the messenger said to her, Peace to you [hello], O full of lovingkindness; our Lord is with you, O blessed among women. . . . And the messenger said to her, Don't be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God."³⁰ To our minds this entire visitation account seems strange. However, to the Near Eastern mind there is absolutely nothing strange about it. There isn't a single aspect of it that is not in "perfect harmony" with the prevailing modes of thought, customs, and speech of the Near East.³¹

Among Near Easterners today, they still talk about "heavenly messengers" coming as patron saints, or of angels coming to the pious, childless wives in dreams and visions. These messengers encourage the childless wives with the promise of motherhood. As I said earlier, many Eastern wives wait (fast and pray) until "the presence" manifests itself to them in a dream and brings the happy news of conception.

Conception is "sacred" and "blessed" in the Near East. Semitic people believe that human reproduction is profoundly holy, for it is "God's life reproducing itself in the life of a human being."³² Also there is no way to describe the reproach an Eastern wife feels if she cannot conceive and remains "barren." Thus, for a special messenger to greet a woman with the words "grace" or "full of grace" in a dream would signify that divine favor is upon "the blessed woman." Again, the people truly believe that children are a heritage from the Lord and every conception or birth is miraculous.³³

³⁰Lk. 1:28-30, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

³¹See footnote 28.

³²Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 25.

³³Ibid., p. 20.

THE MESSAGE

And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.³⁴

Gabriel reveals to Mary that the son she is about to conceive will carry the name Jesus — "Savior." Furthermore, the angelic visitor predicts that the child "*shall be called* the Son of the Highest." Bible students often ask: "Why didn't the angel say, He *is* the Son of the Highest?"

. . . Both the angel and the author of the gospel knew the customs and temperament of Eastern people, especially the Jews. To call a man the Son of God implies that the God of the Jews was married as the pagan gods were. This is blasphemy and is considered a pagan doctrine. God is spirit, life and truth; and these attributes are not subject to conception and birth. Jesus called God his Father, and he is known as God's son in a spiritual and not in a physical sense. . . .³⁵

Thus the angel declares prophetically that her son will manifest divine sonship and, therefore, *will be called the* "Son of the Highest." Jesus' teaching, healing, and his own miraculous recovery from death were the marks of his sonship.

Gabriel further predicts that the messianic kingdom will have no boundaries. In those very ancient biblical days the people of Palestine considered the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea the ends of the world. Since Eastern kings were known by the size of their realms, their ambition was to

³⁴Lk. 1:31-33, KJV.

³⁵Gorge M. Lamsa, *More Light on the Gospel*, p. 90.

extend the boundaries of their kingdom. The saying was: "The larger the territory, the more famous the king."

However, Christ's kingdom is a spiritual domain and, therefore, limitless. It embraces the entire world, including people of all races and countries. Not only does this kingdom transcend earthly, man-made borders, it also transcends space and time. No ruler of this world, past or present, could ever create such a kingdom; but as for the Messiah's reign and supremacy, there will be no limit, for this kingdom dissolves all barriers of time, race, and geography.

Near Easterners believe God participates in the act of procreation in the sense that He allows the woman to become pregnant. "And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and all wild beasts that move upon the earth."³⁶

Interestingly, there is no mention of any dreams that Jesus may have had. However, the basic ministry of Jesus was to fulfill the messianic expectations. Therefore, his life was the fulfillment of the visions and dreams of the Hebrew prophets.

THE BOOK OF ACTS

In the Acts of the Apostles there are many episodes dealing with mysticism. Church boards and committees did not totally guide the early Church. Intuition, dreams, and spiritual revelation guided church expansion and missionary endeavors.

As an example, the apostle Paul while on his way to Bithynia had a dream. A Macedonian man appeared to him in his dream and said: "Come to us in Macedonia." When he

³⁶Gen. 1:28, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

awoke the next morning, instead of going on to Bithynia, he left for Macedonia. He was obedient to his dream.³⁷ The book of Acts is full of such episodes.

PETER'S VISION

One day, the apostle Simon (whose nickname was Peter) went up about noontime on the housetop to pray. Scripture says that he became very hungry and wanted to eat. But while the women were preparing food for him, he fell into a trance.

It is a custom in the East that while women are baking bread or preparing meals, the men retreat to the housetop and impatiently wait. They also want to escape the smoke from the ovens and to pass the time away. In the Near East the housetops serve as the playground and meeting place for children and men. Occasionally, the aroma of the bread or other fresh foods cooking would come up with the smoke to the rooftop, increasing the waiting men's hunger.

Evidently, Simon was extremely hungry. When he fell into the trance state, he saw a large sheet coming down from the sky full of all kinds of animals. Since the apostle had fallen asleep when he was hungry, the first thing he heard the voice say to him was: "Slay and eat." But Simon refused, for in typical Eastern fashion he replied: "Far be it, my Lord; for I have never eaten anything which was unclean and defiled." The term "unclean" means food which was forbidden by Mosaic law. Now the voice came to him a second time and insisted that he should rise, kill, and eat, because what God has cleansed is not "unclean." And the same thing was repeated three times.

When Peter awoke from his vision, he was bewildered and wondered what his dream meant. While the apostle was

³⁷See Acts 16:1-10.

contemplating the vision, he heard a voice say to him: "Behold, three men seek you. Arise, go down, and go with them, without doubt in your mind; for I have sent them." Peter experienced clairaudience; that is, he was guided by a voice. He obeyed the voice, went downstairs and greeted the newly arrived guests. These three men came from the house of Cornelius. Simon Peter was soon to learn that the Gentiles were ready to embrace the gospel of his Lord.³⁸

I have cited only two examples of mysticism from the book of Acts, but there are many more psychic episodes than just these two instances. To sum it up, the expansion program of the early Christian Church grew out of a spiritual movement of inner impressions, inner voices, dreams, visions, and revelations.

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

In conclusion, I must at least mention the last book of the New Testament known as The Revelation or The Apocalypse. This book is a series of dreams and visions. The Aramaic word for "revelation," *giliansa*, also means "vision" and implies "dream." Its root is *gla*, and this means "to uncover," "to lay open," "to declare," "to show," and "to make known."

The visions in this magnificent and alluring book should not be understood literally. Eastern imagery within this book is a symbolic representation of spiritual and historical events. This imagery points to a much larger reality.

As an example, the revelator sees Jesus riding a white horse in the sky.³⁹ The rider's name is "The Word of God." Truth always rides a "white horse"; that is, truth will always

³⁸See Acts 10:1-48.

³⁹See Rev. 19:11-16.

conquer. There will be no literal white horse in the sky. All these things are Near Eastern symbols and figures of speech.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Before I bring this chapter to a close, I would like to leave us with a few comments by Dr. Rihbany concerning dreams and visions.

Whither is the spirit of the present age leading us? Are we drifting away from the mount of vision? There seems to be but little room in this vast and complex life of ours for spiritual dreams and visions. The combination of our commercial activities and the never-ceasing whirl of the wheels of our industries close up our senses to the intimate whisperings of the divine spirit. We see, but with the outward eye. We hear, but with the outward ear. Our inward senses are in grave danger of dying altogether from lack of exercise. The things of this life are too much with us, and they render us oblivious to the gracious beckonings of the higher world. Let not the lesser interests of this life close our hearing to the angel-song [Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good hope toward humankind] which never dies upon the earth. The star of hope never sets, and God's revelations are from everlasting to everlasting.⁴⁰

Let us continue our journey through Scripture with the Seven Keys. We are ready to unlock more passages of the Bible with the Fourth Key, Near Eastern culture.

⁴⁰Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, Chapter IV, "Mystic Tones," p. 46.

CHAPTER 4

The Fourth Key Near Eastern Culture

The study of Near Eastern customs and manners is not only interesting but very important. A lack of understanding of any culture, not just the biblical one, can create mistaken impressions. Even in today's world we often misunderstand many aspects of different cultures.¹

For instance, our major newspapers throughout the States carried descriptive articles about the funeral of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970), president of Egypt. Reporters said that the funeral had been "disrupted" by the "frenzy" of the crowds. These particular articles were misleading to all those who read them. What we failed to understand is Eastern custom.

Among the people of the Near East the only suitable conduct with which to manifest your respect for the deceased is to show that you are overcome emotionally. In contrast, if you stood in "respectful silence" while attending an Eastern funeral, it would mean that you had no feeling at all for the departed. This would be insulting for the grieving family. If we today still have difficulty in comprehending other cultures and have created some mistaken impressions, how much more have we misunderstood biblical culture?

In Chapter Four we are going to look at some customs and manners of biblical times. Our approach to the Eastern culture is different from other biblical systems of study in that

¹As an example, within our own country we have misunderstood the culture of the Native Americans and have created mistaken, harmful images and impressions.

we are applying knowledge gained from the descendants of ancient Assyrian people.²

It was only natural that this old Semitic stock [Assyrians], living where nothing had ever occurred to disturb their habits of life, should keep up the *old Semitic customs*. *They still lived*, or did live until the change of the Great War brought about an alteration, *the life of the Old Testament*. "Bible customs," or those we call such, were, of course, not peculiar to the Hebrew, but were the common heritage of all the stock to which he belonged, and a part of the atmosphere of the land. Thus it was that a man of long experience, when asked by a youngster what books he had best study as a preparation to going out to Iraq, replied, "Take the Bible first and foremost. For the politics of the country, study the Book of Judges. For the philosophy and religious thought, The Book of Job. For the social life and habits — well, add to the Bible 'The Arabian Nights,' Burton's edition, the unexpurgated one!" Even in matters of costume, the customs of old time held good.³

BREAD

Jesus understood very well the attitude of his people regarding bread. That's why he said: "I am the bread of life." His listeners could immediately identify with his saying, because they knew their feelings about the sacredness of bread.

For example, an Easterner will often say: "There is bread and salt between us," meaning we are one by a solemn agreement. The phrase "bread and salt" is a sacred one. Now, if anyone breaks the covenant of "bread and salt," people will consider him a base person and one unworthy of trust. The saying about this offender of the "bread and salt" covenant will

²See *Introduction* — "The Fourth Key."

³Wigram, W. A. , *The Assyrians and Their Neighbors*, pp. 179, 185–86.

be that: "He knows not the meaning of bread and salt." This is a stigma that holds forever.

Certain desert bedouins will treat even their greatest enemies with profound courtesy. They will serve them food and protect them with sword and shelter — for three days only — if they made a "bread and salt" covenant. (However, after three days, if their enemy is smart, he will flee for his life.)

Normally an Easterner will not tell a lie while bread is present on the table. They believe that bread has a mystical sacredness because it is God's provision for one of humankind's basic needs. Where else could daily bread come from but the caring, providing, loving hand of God for all humanity everywhere? Again, we turn to Dr. Rihbany. In his book *The Syrian Christ* he says:

As the son of a Syrian family I was brought up to think of bread as possessing a mystic sacred significance. I never would step on a piece of bread fallen in the road, but would pick it up, press it to my lips for reverence, and place it in a wall or on some other place where it would not be trodden upon.

What always seemed to me to be one of the noblest traditions of my people was their reverence for the 'aish (bread; literally, "the life-giver"). While breaking bread together we would not rise to salute an arriving guest, whatever his social rank. Whether spoken or not, our excuse for not rising and engaging in the cordial Oriental [Near Eastern] salutation before the meal was ended, was our reverence for the food (*hir-metal-'aish*). We could, however, and always did, invite the newcomer most urgently to partake of the repast.

. . . . The 'aish was something more than mere matter. Inasmuch as it sustained life, it was God's own life made tangible for his child, man, to feed upon. The Most High Himself fed our hunger. Does not the psalmist say, "Thou openest thine hand, and satisfieth the desire of every living

thing."?⁴

When Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life, he refers to the sacredness of his teachings. That is, he speaks about his good teaching which nourishes the hearts and souls of the human family. His word brings peace, prosperity and a living, loving relationship with God Who is Life Itself.

DAILY BREAD

A Semite's entire life centers on God; everything he does is in the name of God. In God's name he plants his seed into the freshly plowed ground. He repeats God's name when he is ready to harvest his crop and spreads his sheaves on the threshing floor. When he grinds his grain at the mill, he does it all calling on the blessed name of God.

Eastern women also knead their dough and bake bread in the name of God. When they serve their families with their bread, it is with the sense of God's continual blessings upon them and their provisions. Therefore the expression in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." It is a constant reminder that it is God who provides us with bread. There is a feeling of deep gratitude to the Giver of all good and perfect gifts.

I have translated this section of the Lord's Prayer as: "You provide us bread for our needs from day to day." *Lahma*, an Aramaic word, means both "bread" and "food." The expression, "come and let us eat bread together" means "come and let us have a meal together."

Daily bread is a reminder of God's presence which is ever with us and provides for all our needs. A Semitic poet put it this way:

⁴Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 193-95.

Back of the loaf is the snowy flour;
Back of the flour, the mill,
Back of the mill is the wheat and the sower,
and the sun, and the Father's will.⁵

Eastern bread is not shaped like a long loaf of Italian or French bread. Its shape is round like a very large pizza (about ten to twelve inches in diameter) and very thin like a corn tortilla. It is possible to feed 40 people on one loaf of Eastern "bedouin" bread.

THE APPLE

Some biblical teachers believe that the apple is a symbol of evil; therefore, the apple has become known as the fruit of the fall of humanity. However, according to the Near Eastern custom nothing could be further from the truth. To a Semite, an apple is a symbol of beauty, affection, and friendship. Eastern people in their writings present the apple as a symbol of love.

Eastern women often place their babies under the shadowy protection of the apple and fig trees. For, when the sun is very hot, the shade of the apple tree is cool and refreshing. The ill and the weak often seek out the shadow of certain trees for healing, especially the apple tree.

Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? I raised thee up [awakened you] under the apple tree; there thy mother brought thee forth; there she brought thee forth that bare thee.⁶

⁵Ibid. p. 197.

⁶Song of Sol. 8:5, KJV.

At wedding feasts, apples and dates are the confections. Easterners construct an artificial tree. They decorate all its branches with beautiful apples and dainty foods which they divide among the guests.

Among the Assyrian mountain people of Northern Iraq, a man gives a woman an apple as a symbol of his love for her. Also, when a bride approaches her future home, the bridegroom stands on the roof and throws an apple to her. Usually the apple is caught by one of the young people who attended the wedding procession.

As one can readily see, in Bible lands Easterners desire, covet, and prize the apple more than any other fruit. In the poetical book of love, *The Song of Solomon*, we read: "Refresh me with affections, *surround me with apples* because I am sick for love."⁷

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Now we come to a question that Bible readers have often asked me. Did Adam and Eve eat an apple? It is helpful to realize that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that appears in the Garden of Eden narrative is not an actual fruit tree. And it definitely wasn't an apple tree. The writer of Genesis, Chapters Two and Three, names the tree and describes it metaphorically as "the knowledge of good and evil." An apple was not the culprit, nor was it any particular fruit.

"The tree of knowledge" has hundreds of varying interpretations. Among biblical experts the significance of the tree continues as a protracted and endless discussion. One author has narrowed it down to three basic explanations:

⁷Song of Sol. 2:5, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

ethical, intellectual, and sexual.⁸ Nonetheless, there is a metaphysical interpretation that I find interesting.

When Adam and Eve partook of the knowledge of good and evil, they began to "know" (perceive) life as an antagonistic dualism. The story is a symbolic representation of humankind's mistaken perception of life. In other words, humanity no longer comprehends the oneness of life in its complementary and unfragmented state; humans describe life in terms of Spirit versus Matter, Birth versus Death, and so forth. Therefore, humans live their lives in constant conflict until their perception radically changes and their thinking transcends old patterns. No matter how one may interpret the biblical episode of the "Trees of the Garden of Eden," we know that they are not literal fruit trees.

SWADDLING CLOTHES

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him in swaddling bands and laid him in a manger, because they had no room where they were lodging."⁹ A very old and common practice among Near Eastern people was the swaddling of newborn babies. In many areas of the Near East this custom still prevails today.

According to this custom, mothers first bathe their newborn infants, then gently rub a very small amount of salt finely pulverized in a stone mortar for this great occasion. They also sprinkle their babies with a powder made of dried myrtle leaves. Eastern parents believe that putting salt on the baby's body will make his or her flesh firm. This little ceremony also

⁸See W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: Genesis — A Modern Commentary*, pp. 34–36.

⁹Lk. 2:7, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

represents a symbolic testimony that the parents will raise the child to be truthful and faithful.

The swaddle is a square yard of cloth to which the parent attaches a long narrow band at one corner. Usually the mother wraps the infant in the swaddle with its arms close to its body and its legs stretched out; then she winds the narrow band around the body from shoulders to ankles. The infant looks like a tiny Egyptian mummy.¹⁰ Semitic people swaddle their babies several times a day for at least six months, believing this will help their little bodies to grow straight and firm. Again, this is also a sign that the parents will teach the child to become honest, straightforward, and free from crookedness. Generally, mothers nurse their infants until two or three years of age.¹¹

In certain areas of the Near East, to make a remark that a person may not have been "salted" at his birth is to arouse a great deal of trouble. Remember, salt symbolically represents faithfulness. Not to be salted or swaddled implies that the child was unwanted and its father unrecognized.

Ezekiel, the Hebrew prophet, refers to this custom in his prophecy. He speaks out against the citizens of Jerusalem who were unfaithful to God and His commandments. Ezekiel rebukes:

Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: Your root and your nativity is of the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. And as for the one who bore you, in the day that you were born she did not *cut your navel, neither did she wash you with water nor did she salt your body nor wrap you in swaddling clothes at all.*¹²

¹⁰Ibid. p. 28.

¹¹And in some areas of the Near East, they will nurse their infants until they are four or five years old.

¹²Ezk. 16:3-4, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico.

We can see that this custom is very important and symbolically significant. It would be only natural that Mary, the mother of Jesus, would salt and swaddle her newborn infant. Jesus was to be true to God and His word. Thus, his swaddling represented loyalty and faithfulness to his heavenly Father as well as to his parents. This custom, and its spiritual meaning, applied to all children who were swaddled.

UPON ENTERING A HOME

Entering an Eastern home is different from our custom in the West. For instance, our hats come off when entering a home. But when entering an Eastern home, the shoes come off and the hat remains on one's head. The greeting between host and guest is very expansive and unrestrained.

Before knocking on the door with a staff, the guest would call out to those who are in the house with a saying, such as: "O good dwellers of this house!" A reply from within the home would be: "Most welcome. Please be good enough to come in." Then the guest would immediately remove his shoes, leave them outside by the threshold, and perhaps rest his staff against the doorpost.

The moment the guest enters the house he begins his profuse greetings of peace. He then would make prolonged and solicitous questions about the health, welfare, and happiness of the family. The host, of course, would answer his questions, and if the two are fairly close, the host might say something like:

You have greatly honored me by coming into my home. I am not worthy of it. It is a blessing to have you under my roof; your presence makes our day — *three times as happy*. This house is yours; you can burn it if you wish. My children also are at your disposal; I would sacrifice them all

for your pleasure.¹³

This protracted and extravagant welcome simply means: "I am glad to see you. Please make yourself at home." However, an Easterner would find our Western style of welcoming very dull. He delights in his flowery and extremely complimentary expression of affection to his guest.

Usually the guest will ask to sit in a lowly place near the door, but the host will take him by the arm and say: "No, that is impossible. You must come and sit up higher." The host will then lead him to a place close to him on a good soft cushion.

However, after a brief but very polite refusal, the guest would customarily express himself in such terms as: "I am not worthy to sit close to you," "I am not good enough," or "to sit near you is above my station in life." Nevertheless, after some persuasion, he will happily "give in" to the urging of his most gracious host. Now we can understand what Jesus meant when he was instructing his disciples in Eastern etiquette and said:

But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher; then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.¹⁴

Here is a typical invitation between a host and his guest:

Ennoble us by your presence.

I would be ennobled but I cannot accept.

That cannot be.

¹³Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 127.

¹⁴Lk. 14:10-11, KJV.

Yea, yea, it must be.

No, I swear against you, by our friendship, and by the life of God. I love just to acquaint you with my bread and salt.

I swear also that I find it impossible to accept. Your bread and salt are known to all.

Yea, do it just for our own good. By coming to us you come to your own home. Let us repay your bounty to us.

By the compassion of Allah, I have not bestowed any bounty upon you worth mentioning.

At this point in the invitation the host will seize his guest by the arm and with an emphatic, "I will not let you go," will pull at him and will drag him bodily into the house. Then the guest, happy in being vanquished with "honor," consents to the invitation.¹⁵

Once all the fine and elaborate Eastern etiquette is over, the guest will sit with dignified freedom next to the host, usually with his legs folded under him and his palms resting upon his knees.

TRAVELING

After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come. Therefore, said he unto them, the harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he would send forth laborers into his harvest. Go your way, behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves. Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes; and salute no man by

¹⁵Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 208–09.

the way.¹⁶

Jesus' instruction to his disciples not to greet anyone while traveling from city to city appears quite strange. Easterners are very social and often greet each other warmly, whether they are in their hometown or traveling from place to place. Again, Dr. Abraham Rihbany details a common conversation between two strangers meeting on the road:

The Easterner's greeting is a copious flow of soul, whose intimacy and inquisitiveness are very strange to the mentality of the West. . . .

May God [Allah] give you health and strength.

Oh, may God [Allah] refresh and strengthen your life.

Whence has your excellent presence come, and where are you facing?

From Nazareth have I come, and I am facing Damascus.

What is your precious Name?

Your humble servant Mas'ud son of Yusuf of the clan of Job, and my years, friend, are four and thirty.

All honor, all honor! May your life be long and happy.

What children have you?

Three sons in the keeping of God.

Thus the mutually complimentary conversation and the searching of hearts continue until each of the travelers is thoroughly informed concerning the persona, domestic, and social affairs of the other. The trade, the income, the

¹⁶Lk. 10:1-4, KJV.

profession, the cares and anxieties, and even the likes and dislikes of each are made known to the other before their ways depart.¹⁷

Sometimes the traveler may also receive an oral invitation to the home of the person he has just met. And it may take three or more days before the traveler may leave.¹⁸

When one does not greet on the road, Easterners understand that the wayfarer is on very urgent business. Jesus did not want his apostles detained as this would have delayed the spread of his gospel. Therefore, his command not to salute any man on the road.

Elisha, a prophet of God, gave a similar command to his servant Gehazi. His servant had a mission of healing to do. Elisha did not want Gehazi delayed while traveling; thus, he forbade him to greet anyone on the road.¹⁹

TRAVELING WITHOUT FEAR

Jesus also commanded his disciples not to carry purse, scrip nor shoes. Money was usually carried in purses or belts wrapped around the men's waists. The term "scrip" means a bag. In Aramaic the term is *tarmala*.

Eastern men ordinarily carry their food supplies in the *tarmala*. Carrying extra shoes or clothing would invite bandits to attack and rob them. Jesus did not want his disciples exposed to this kind of danger.

The disciples were to teach what Jesus had taught them, heal the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God had come. People provided the disciples with food, shelter, and

¹⁷Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 255-257.

¹⁸See Judges 19:4-9.

¹⁹See 2 Ki. 4:29.

anything else that was necessary. After all, the disciples ministered to the spiritual, mental, and physical needs of the people. This was all in accord with Near Eastern custom. By remaining free of any excess baggage, the disciples could travel without fear and fulfill the commission of their master.²⁰

WEDDING CUSTOMS

Near Eastern wedding customs are truly fascinating. In this book we will discuss only certain traditions as they relate to particular teachings of Scripture. Let us examine one of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them; But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made. Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you; but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage; and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.²¹

²⁰See George M. Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, pp. 75–78.

²¹Mt. 25:1–13, KJV.

In many areas of the Near East where people still practice ancient customs, they do not pay attention to time as we do in the Occident. For instance, a wedding feast scheduled for six o'clock in the evening may not take place until midnight, three o'clock the next morning, or two to three days later. We can now understand why Jesus commends the five wise virgins who brought extra oil with them. But why did the virgins have to bring oil at all?

Normally Eastern weddings take place in the early autumn or in the winter. A wedding feast will start in the evening and continue all night. The celebration for a rich family usually lasts seven days and seven nights. For a poor family, it will continue for only three days and nights.

People use candles or oil lamps for their light. They also use butter as fuel for their lamps. The guests bring candles and lamps to the reception house and this furnishes the needed light. Once the bride and bridegroom have prepared themselves and are ready with the procession to enter the banquet house, only those with candles and lights may enter. No wedding is properly conducted without abundant light.

Many visitors from nearby towns will also come to purchase the oil that is available. Then these visitors, to their dismay, might discover that the shops are not open because the oil vendors are waiting for the coming bride. Therefore, wise virgins always carry extra oil should the bride and bridegroom be delayed.

Arrangements for the festivities, especially the preparation of the bride and groom, may take a long time. Ancient custom calls for the ritual bathing of the couple. Then there may be difficulties in obtaining water which would delay the feast. The bride usually wears no less than seven dresses and her face is veiled and totally hidden. Besides these *normal* delays that may occur, Easterners believe in taking plenty of time.

The meaning of Jesus' parable is clear. His story teaches

that his disciples, apostles, and followers are to be prepared always. They were to work for the goals of the kingdom of God. His disciples could easily relate to this parable. Doubtless, they had personally seen young virgins refused entry into the reception house because of their lateness.

WEDDING AT CANA

John in his gospel reports a wedding feast that he attended with his master at Cana in Galilee. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also attending with her son and a few of his disciples. "And when the wine ran low, his mother said to Jesus, They have no wine. Jesus said to her, What is it to me and to you, woman, my turn has not yet come. His mother said to the helpers, Whatever he tells you, do it."²² The King James Version reads differently. It says: "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come."

It appears as if Jesus had rebuked his mother, but this was not true. Jesus spoke to his mother in a very mild manner. Calling her "woman" is a typical Aramaic Semitic expression of politeness. *Attha*, "woman," is similar to our respectful English term "ma'am."

A better rendering of the phrase "my hour has not yet come" is "my turn has not yet come." *Shaa* means "hour," "turn," and "time." In this passage it implies "turn" and not "hour." This entire passage in John points to the Eastern custom of purchasing and providing wine at wedding feasts. What Jesus really says to his mother is: "What concern is it of ours? It is not yet my turn to buy wine for the guests."

One must understand the custom of entertaining at an

²²Jn. 2:3-5, Lamsa translation.

ancient reception. At the banquet house men sit on the floor in a line according to their age and social status. Women usually sit on the opposite side, but in a circle. Near the door servants usually stand by ready to attend the guests. Musicians may also occupy a position near the door.

The groom supplies all the food. Certain neighbors also bring in other favorite foods on trays as gifts to the couple. However, individual guests provide wine. That is, each guest takes his turn in ordering the servants to obtain wine. As they pour and distribute it, the server announces the name of the person who purchased the wine. Then everyone drinks to the health and happiness of the newlyweds.

Every guest contributes to the success of the wedding feast. Each guest must show his friendship and loyalty to the bride and groom by giving generously when it is his turn. Nonetheless, each guest must be careful not to call the servants to bring wine before his proper time. If this should happen, even unintentionally, it would create resentment among the others, especially to the guests who are of a higher social status. Guests would regard anyone who stepped out of turn an enemy. The wedding feast must preserve and follow protocol.²³

Jesus knew when it was his turn to serve wine. And this is all that Jesus meant by telling his mother: "My hour [turn] has not yet come." Mary realized her son was aware of his proper time. Therefore, she immediately informed the servants to respond to her son when he called for wine. She also assured the helpers that she would pay for the wine. In the Near East, when a mother and son travel together, the mother usually holds the family purse. Eastern robbers would consider it cowardly to steal from a woman.

²³George M. Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, pp. 317-320.

THE LAST SUPPER

Most Bible readers visualize the momentous scene of the Last Supper in a totally Western setting. Why? It is Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, "The Last Supper," that continually influences our vision of this biblical event. This renowned Italian artist gave the world a remarkable character study of Jesus and his apostles. Nonetheless, we must understand that da Vinci was not portraying a historical Near Eastern milieu. His entire aesthetic work — the room, the table, the attire of the apostles and Jesus, and even the seating arrangement — are of his day and his time. Therefore what is depicted is an Italian provincial scene.

What is the Near Eastern setting for the Last Supper? Typically, Jesus and his disciples sat on the floor in a circle. They gathered in one of the small rooms of a *balakhana*, an inn for men only. During the supper, the apostles and their master wore hats. Spread on the floor in the center of the room was a cloth called a *pathora*. Placed on the *pathora* were two or three large dishes, an earthen cup, and a little jar filled with wine. In the center, within the reach of everyone in the circle, was the cup; the small jar was near Jesus.

According to custom, on such occasions each of the few large plates contained a different kind of food. Bread passes from one to another. Meat wrapped in thin loaves of bread called "sop" may also pass from one to another. Often the celebrants place the wrapped meat in their pockets and carry it home. Guests do not hesitate to reach for food on other men's dishes.

The posture of the beloved disciple, John, who was leaning on Jesus' chest, is also a common social custom. To this very day Eastern male friends who are very close still maintain this attitude while eating together. For them it is as customary as two Western male friends shaking hands. And when trusted friends are about to part from one another, especially with the

prospect of not seeing each other again, they will show great affection for each other. This affectionate sharing is expressed on the eve of a journey, or when one is about to face a perilous assignment.

During the supper Jesus *let himself go*. He expressed his feelings freely and openly to his disciples. He let them know of his disappointment in one who was about to betray him. And, because these twelve would never gather in this manner again, Jesus expressed other sentiments which were common to an Eastern farewell supper.

Things Jesus said and did at the last supper were not isolated or uncommon events. A brotherly atmosphere and intimate, emotional utterances usually characterize a supper of this type, especially in the shadow of approaching danger.

It is the custom of a gracious host to ask for a joyous ending to a visit. He will have the whole company of men drink from one cup as a sign of their friendship. The phrase "Do this in remembrance of me" is an affectionate request and implies "I love you; therefore, I am always with you." When Jesus made this request of his disciples they understood his loving statement to mean that a powerful bond of love existed between them. And, because of this love, they could not be separated from one another.²⁴ Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure.

At Eastern feasts, and especially in the region of Galilee, sharing food with those who stand and serve wine and water to the guests is common. However, exchanges of food with friends take on a deeper meaning. Friends hand each other choice portions of food as signs of close intimacy. An affectionate exchange of food never occurs with an enemy.

Again, Jesus let his feelings go when he handed Judas, the betrayer, his "sop." "And when he [Jesus] had dipped the

²⁴See, Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 64-65.

sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon."²⁵ When we understand this Eastern custom we quickly comprehend the act of love Jesus manifested by sharing his sop with Judas. Jesus truly practiced his own teachings — "Love your enemies." Through his sharing of the sop, Jesus was telling Judas that he did not see him as an enemy. Jesus felt deep compassion and love for Judas. With the symbolic gesture of sharing food, he says: "Here is my bread of friendship, and what you have to do, do quickly."²⁶ Shortly after that Judas betrayed Jesus to his priestly adversaries for thirty pieces of silver.

It was at this supper that Jesus sealed his love and friendship with his disciples. First he pointed to the lamb and the bread, and then to the wine. While he was doing this, he said that his body was to become like the lamb and bread, broken and eaten. And he said his blood was like the wine — all were to drink of it. He gave his life to reveal a new way of living for all humanity.

GIVING FOOD TO CHILDREN AT NIGHT

Another custom that Jesus refers to is the giving of food to children. In the King James Version of the gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches the following:

If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or, if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask

²⁵Jn. 13:16, KJV.

²⁶Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 69.

him?²⁷

The Lamsa translation reads:

For who is among you, a father, if his son should ask him bread, what! would he hand him a stone? and if he should ask him a fish, what! would he hand him a snake instead of a fish? And if he should ask him for an egg, what! would he hand him a scorpion? So if you, who err, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father give the Holy Spirit from heaven to those who ask him?

During the night a child may cry out because of hunger. The father, responding to the cry of his child, will give him a fish or an egg. He is careful not to accidentally pick up a scorpion instead. In Near Eastern households an error like this can easily occur. Scorpions often crawl into tents and hide with the bread or in the straw with the eggs.

According to the King James Version of the Bible, Jesus tells his listeners that they are evil — "If ye then, being evil" — but as you will see, according to the Aramaic text (my translation) Jesus says: "And if, then, you who make mistakes know how to . . ." In other words, Jesus tells us that a father, being human, can make mistakes or err. The mistake could occur when giving a gift of bread or an egg to his child at night. The term "evil" in this verse does not mean "evil" as we often think of it. This word simply means an error or mistake. *Bisha*, "evil," also means "immature" or "imperfect." In essence, what Jesus says is: "If you who are human and make mistakes are still very discriminating and careful to give your children good gifts, how much more so is your heavenly Father discriminating and careful to give you only that which is beneficial for you."

This is the reason our heavenly Father gives us the Holy

²⁷Lk. 11:11-13.

Spirit. But why would one need the Holy Spirit to obtain appropriate gifts? The Holy Spirit, which indwells a human being, can guide that individual to the gifts that one is seeking. Sometimes one may ask for things that may be harmful to him or her or their families, for the human mind often fails to see the whole picture. When one seeks God's counsel in the things that he or she undertakes, then good gifts result from this seeking. The Spirit, when guiding people, inspires them to do that which is good, beneficial, and without error. "For it is God who inspires you with the will to do the good things which you desire to do."²⁸

COVERING THE HEAD

In keeping with ancient customs, women always kept their faces veiled. Usually they covered their heads in the presence of men, seers, priests, rabbis, or any religious authority. Women veiled their faces not out of fear, but out of reverence and respect.

Hebrew scripture gives us several incidents of this custom. Rebekah covered her face as a token of respect when she saw Isaac coming to greet her.²⁹ Women also covered their faces when praying. The apostle Paul cites this custom: "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."³⁰ The Aramaic text helps clarify the last part of the fifth verse: "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her

²⁸Phil. 2:13, Lamsa translation.

²⁹Gen. 24:65.

³⁰1 Cor. 11:4-5, KJV.

head; for she is equal to her whose head is shaven."³¹ Although the translation is clear, the last part of the verse is still difficult to understand.

In Eastern countries the head of a harlot was shaven, that is, her hair was cut very short. The length of an Eastern woman's hair establishes her dignity and beauty. Thus an Eastern woman would never have her hair cut short. This would be disgraceful and denote that she was a harlot.

In his pastoral letter to the Corinthians, Paul admonished Semitic Christian women to continue the old tradition of praying with their faces veiled and their heads covered. He compares an unveiled praying woman to a harlot, because custom dictated that a woman must have her face veiled. Any woman doing otherwise would bring shame upon herself. An unveiled woman suggests that she might be soliciting. Of course, we must keep in mind that this custom has to do with Eastern tradition.

When Eastern men pray, they remove their hats and shoes as a sign of reverence to God. Usually criminals, when condemned and put to death, have their heads covered. "As the word went out of the King's mouth, they covered Haman's face."³² When the Sanhedrin council condemned Jesus for blasphemy, they covered his head as a sign that he had transgressed the holy law. "Then some of the men began to spit in his face and they covered his face and struck him on his head, saying, Prophecy; and the soldiers smote him on his cheeks."³³

³¹Lamsa translation.

³²Esther 7:8.

³³Mk. 14:65, KJV.

THE LENGTH OF HAIR

Eastern tradition dictates that a man must not have long hair. It is a shame and a disgrace for him, but a woman having long hair reveals her beauty and dignity. Even Mosaic law prohibits men from having long hair. "You shall not let the hair of your heads grow, neither shall you trim the corners of your beard."³⁴

Again, Paul in his letter to the Corinthians comments about hair. "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair, it is a disgrace to him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her; for hair is given her for a covering. But if any man dispute these things, we have no precedent, neither has the church of God."³⁵

"Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair, it is a disgrace to him?" This saying possibly derives from a Jewish commentary. We know that primitive man kept his hair long to protect his body. The custom of cutting hair evolved later. Men apparently cut their hair to distinguish themselves from women. It is also probable that men cutting their hair came from an instituted religious ordinance.

It is possible that Paul used the term "nature" to suggest an ancient custom or manner. In reality, nature has nothing to do with religious customs and manners. To put it simply, nature doesn't care whether a man's hair is long or short. Nonetheless, it is traditional for men to distinguish themselves from women through style of hair and dress.

Customs and manners are changeable within each culture. Paul goes on to say that neither the apostles nor the Church of Jesus Christ has any precedent on which to argue this custom.

³⁴Lev. 19:27, Lamsa translation.

³⁵1 Cor. 11:14-16, Lamsa translation.

In the book of Judges we read that Samson's long hair gave him power and glory. It was not a disgrace for him to have long hair. God had told his parents that no razor was to touch his hair. When Samson broke this command, he lost his strength.

There were many men in the Hebrew Bible who took the Nazarite vow. It permitted them to let their hair grow long until they fulfilled their commitment to the vow. Once completed, the men cut their hair.³⁶

A few decades from now men and women may dress identically, and customs may demand that they do so. Enlightenment and salvation do not depend on observance of mere customs, traditions, and manners. The apostle Paul teaches that enlightenment and salvation come through the grace of God and the practice of the teachings of Jesus, the Messiah.

CONCLUSION

There are many more customs to explore throughout the Bible. This work is not an exhaustive study of Bible customs. However, for those who wish to pursue further studies in the customs and manners of the Near Eastern people, I recommend the reader consult the Bibliography.

³⁶See, Num. 6:1-8.

CHAPTER 5

The Fifth Key Semitic Psychology

A country's customs and manners usually derive from its national consciousness and traditional thinking. When we strive to discern the characteristics of a specific ethnic group, we need to understand their psychological background. Therefore, comprehending the unique makeup of Near Eastern Semitic people is vital to biblical studies.

Had the creed-makers of Christendom approached the Bible by way of Oriental psychology, had they viewed the Scriptures against the background of Syrian life, they would not have dealt with Holy Writ as a jurist deals with legislative enactments. Again, had the unfriendly critics of the Bible real acquaintance with the land of its birth, they would not have been so sure that the Bible was "a mass of impossibilities." The sad fact is that the Bible has suffered violence from literalists among its friends, as from its enemies.¹

When we thoughtfully consider a race's basic individual psychology from a nonjudgmental attitude, we can comprehend certain behaviors and speech that may seem strange to us. For example, many critics of Jesus' teachings brand some of his sayings as "contradictory," "impractical," and "irrelevant for today's world." The reason for this harsh critique is that these same commentators either do not know or do not consider the Semitic psychological complex from which Jesus taught. We can easily draw invalid conclusions from various biblical

¹Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 128.

passages simply because we see them through our own eyes and not those of the Near East.

Culture and psychology are inseparable. And, because of their inseparability, we shall continue to learn about biblical culture and simultaneously learn about its psychological setting. Consequently, in this chapter, the Fourth Key overlaps the Fifth Key — Semitic psychology.

I am not working with any judgment or comparison of values. Let the reader bear in mind that the purpose of this writing is neither to condemn nor to condone any Near Eastern attitude and behavior. I draw no conclusions that either Western or Eastern culture is inferior or superior. My intent is simply to bring enlightenment to certain scriptural verses or narratives.

TIME

Semites value friendships and relationships more highly than they do the observance of time. Family ties, including distant relatives, are very strong in this culture. An Easterner does not pay much attention to the clock, details, or perfect accuracy in things he says or does.

To an Easterner, the short, straight-to-the-meaning expressions of Western businesspeople in commercial dealings seem to drain from life its pleasures. And for them it places a "disproportionate value on time." Easterners do not work with a "bottom line" mentality. They believe that the major value of the moment must not be computed in terms of business and money. Time needs to be spent in modes of sociability and rich, joyful companionship.

Regarding living, a poetic sense of life, and not prosaic accuracy, must take precedence. For instance, in the Western world, describing events with utmost care and detail is very important. However, to an Easterner it does not matter. He

sees no difference between five o'clock and five-thirty, or whether a conversation took place on a housetop, or in the house. The objective is to know the substance of what had taken place, with as many backup details as may be "conveniently remembered."²

There is much more of intellectual inaccuracy than of moral delinquency in the Easterner's speech. His misstatements are more often the result of indifference than the deliberate purpose to deceive. One of his besetting sins is his *ma besay-il* — "it does not matter."

A case may be overstated or understated, not necessarily for the purpose of deceiving, but to impress the hearer with the significance or with the insignificance of it.

If a sleeper who had been expected to rise at sunrise should oversleep and need to be awakened, say half an hour or an hour later than the appointed time, he is then aroused with the call, "Arise, it is noon already — *qum sar edh-hir*." Of a strong and brave man it is said, "He can split the earth — *yekkid el-aridh*." The Syrians suffer from no misunderstanding in such cases. They *discern* one another's meaning.

So also many Scriptural passages need to be *discerned*. The purpose of the Oriental speaker or writer must be sought often beyond the letter of his statement, which he uses with great freedom.³

One of Jesus' sayings provides us a good example of not taking an Easterner literally when he mentions time: "For as Jonah was in the whale's belly three days and three nights, so the Son of man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights."⁴ Was Jesus "in the heart of the earth" for exactly three days and three nights? Or are we facing a Semitic way of

²Ibid., pp. 107-113.

³Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁴Mt. 12:40, KJV.

thinking?

According to the gospels, he was crucified on Friday afternoon and taken down from the cross before the Sabbath (sunset).⁵ The disciples placed Jesus' body in a borrowed tomb Friday evening. He lay in the tomb all Friday night and all day Saturday. Then, early Sunday morning he arose from the sepulcher. We can see that this episode did not literally form three 24-hour periods — three days and three nights. But to an Easterner "it does not matter." It was Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and for them it is three days and three nights.

To this day, if you were to visit an Eastern friend who lived his life according to the old ways of thinking, the situation might be as follows. Let us say that you remained only one day with your friend. After your departure, he would likely tell everyone that you had been with him for three days and three nights. Of course, we would consider this a fabrication. Nonetheless, to an Easterner the accuracy of just saying "one day" is too much attention to literal detail.

Most of what we might call "inconsistencies" and "discrepancies" in the gospels does not present a problem to the Eastern mind, but it does to the Western mind. Had the learned authorities realized the habits and psychological makeup of Eastern people, perhaps it would have saved all of us from doubts and misreading of Scripture. I believe I have said enough regarding differences between the East and the West. Let us now consider working with certain scriptural passages and applying the Fifth Key.

WOMEN

Probably on no other topic do the Eastern and Western worlds differ more extensively than on the status of women. As

⁵The Sabbath begins on Friday evening — 6 P.M.

I mentioned earlier,⁶ my purpose is not to judge Near Eastern attitudes about anything, especially concerning women. Nor is it my place to condemn or condone, neither accuse nor excuse, their particular outlook. The purpose of this writing is merely to describe the psychological basis and customs involving Near Eastern women and relate them to the biblical setting. Unfortunately, Western peoples misunderstand the Near Eastern cultural attitude toward women.

It is true that an unwritten social code dominates Eastern culture. Societies of the Near East give men precedence; it is a male-oriented world. Easterners feel it is "unnecessary and uncomplimentary to both sexes to give women social and domestic prominence."⁷ They also think that "Western man has become the slave of his wife."⁸ All of this amounts to a serious failure by both worlds to see the fine grass roots of each culture.

WHAT PAUL REALLY SAID ABOUT WOMEN

Some New Testament readers and teachers think that the apostle Paul's ideas about women were not translated correctly. Therefore a misconception prevails in our assessment of Paul's teachings. Again, if we are to understand Paul's writings, we need to consider the socio-psychological customs of the times.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians repeats an old traditional Near Eastern attitude:

For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but

⁶See p. 99, second paragraph.

⁷Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 316.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 317.

the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.⁹

Let us make a comparison. The following is from the Aramaic Peshitta text:

For a man indeed ought not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man was not created from the woman; but the woman was created from the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to be modest and cover her head as a mark of respect to the angels [messengers]. Nevertheless, in our Lord [according to what Jesus taught us] there is no preference between man and woman, neither between woman and man. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.¹⁰

As we can readily see, the English translation of the Aramaic text is obvious. Paul clearly reinforces the people's position and belief system of that age. However, the apostle says: "Nevertheless, in our Lord, [that is, according to what Jesus taught us,] *there is no preference between man and woman*, neither between woman and man."

In his pastoral letter, Paul transcends the religio-social and psychological custom. He could do this because he understood the deeper meanings of Jesus' teaching. Jesus taught the original idea of man and woman; both are the image

⁹1 Cor. 11:7-12, KJV.

¹⁰1 Cor. 11:7-12, Lamsa translation except for the brackets. The interpolations within the brackets are mine.

and likeness of God. One is not inferior. Neither is the other superior. Both are God's likeness.

Jesus taught directly from Genesis 1:27: "So God made man in his image and likeness; male and female made he them." The equality of men and women is the biblical teaching. Postbiblical writings did not influence Jesus when he taught.¹¹ (However, some of these writings did influence the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors in their interpretation of Hebrew Scripture.)

ANGELS AND WOMEN

What did Paul mean when he said, "for this reason the woman ought to be modest and cover her head as a mark of respect to the angels"? Near Eastern women always cover their faces in the presence of holy men, not as a sign of fear, but out of respect, dignity, and reverence. People refer to all amiable, pious, and good-hearted men and women as "angels of God." Easterners also believe that when they pray, angels are present to take their supplications before the throne of God. In the above verse the term "angels" refers to holy or pious men.

Interestingly, we have no recording of Jesus telling us anything about ordinances and customs for women to cover their heads. He knew men and women were equal and said nothing about prayer habits for women. Jesus emphasized humane treatment toward our fellow-humans.

¹¹Scholars refer to the collection of ancient, postbiblical writings as *The Pseudepigrapha* (300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.). The Jews during this period composed and compiled many of these documents. Early Christian scribes edited and expanded some of these manuscripts. They are essential reading for an understanding of early Judaism and for the study of Christian origins. Many cultural ideas concerning the status of women changed during this span of time (300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.). These significant social changes are evident in the postbiblical writings.

WOMEN KEEPING SILENT

In many areas of the Near East to this very day, women remain silent and do not participate orally in worship services. They stand behind the congregation of men and observe with great appreciation the religious practices of their men.

In the temple or mosque of the orthodox Jewish and Islamic faiths women have their own separate places of worship. Generally, many pious women do not attend services but pray and study Scripture at home. They also learn from their husbands, brothers, sons, and the priests and teachers of their particular religions.

The apostle Paul understood very well the tenacious hold traditional Semitic customs had on the society of his day. It would have been scandalous to allow a woman to stand before a congregation of men and read Scripture. This is the reason Paul says again in his letter to Timothy: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."¹²

None of these customs, however, is a part of Jesus' teachings. Jesus did not exclude women. Nor did he uphold some of the old customs or beliefs that discriminated against women. Nonetheless, Paul did uphold the custom of women not speaking, singing, or participating in any way in the service.

If one carefully searches through Scripture, one finds Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, and other women singing and praising God with timbrels.¹³ And according to a few New Testament records, women were always supporters of the faith. They definitely played a role, and a very important one, in the spread of their faith.

¹²1 Tim. 2:11-12, KJV.

¹³See Ex. 15:20-21.

OBEDIENCE

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to our Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church, and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved his Church and gave himself for it.¹⁴

Women do not transact business, engage in teaching, or minister in spiritual work outside the home. Women look to their husbands for advice, support, and security. However, a husband may negotiate business without ever consulting his wife.

In the Near East a husband is like an overlord. And despite this fact, at certain times and cases where a woman has a better business judgment than her husband, the wife may interfere and conduct business. In these circumstances a woman must be courageous when taking things into her own hand and guide her husband, because it may result in family quarrels.

Evidently among the Ephesian congregants, there was some discontent between married couples. Paul instructs them to work in love and harmony. He recommends that wives should be obedient to their husbands in matters which concern family affairs. And, they must conduct their lives with mutual affection and understanding. He does not mean that women should submit themselves to rancor or abusive conduct.

In some Eastern faiths, and even in certain Islamic religious groups, women have restricted freedom and very little authority. However, in Jesus' teaching, a husband and wife are one. Paul always advises love and loyalty as the tie that binds husband and wife.

¹⁴Eph. 5:22-25, KJV.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Jesus knew and understood the social conditions under which Near Eastern women lived. In his teaching, he was protective of women's rights, especially regarding divorce. According to the King James Version of the gospel of Matthew, the writer reports Jesus as having said:

It hath been said, Whoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, that whoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.¹⁵

But the Lamsa translation of Matthew's gospel reads differently:

It has been said that whoever divorces his wife, must give her divorce papers. But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is separated but not divorced, commits adultery.¹⁶

According to the Eastern Aramaic text of Matthew's gospel, a woman has permission to remarry providing she is divorced, and not just separated. Marriage is a sacred institution. Therefore, Easterners do not believe in civil marriages or recognize them as having authority. What they do consider essential is a payment of the dowry and the blessings that a priest, rabbi, or holy man pronounces upon them. These customs and religious rites fashion the sacred bond between a man and woman.

Where ancient customs still prevail, parents or match-

¹⁵Mt. 5:31-32, KJV.

¹⁶Mt. 5:31-32, Lamsa translation.

makers usually arrange a marriage. The prospective bride does not give her consent, nor does she dissent. Therefore women have nothing to say when the question of divorce arises. The sole power is with the husband, who exercises unlimited authority over his wife or wives.

Among Near Eastern Assyrian Christians who still follow the old biblical laws there are very few cases of divorce. The attitude of Assyrian men toward their wives differs considerably from other Semitic races. They are usually more liberal, and to some degree their women exercise certain freedoms equal to that of Western women.

Present-day law among these Assyrian people says that if a man marries a woman who has been abandoned and not divorced, they are excommunicated from the Church; but if an abandoned woman has obtained divorce papers, she may remarry legally.

A clearer understanding concerning the divorce question can be gained by studying the divorce customs among non-Christian Semites such as the Jews in Mesopotamia and Persia, the Arabian, and the non-Semitic races who are influenced by Semitic religion and culture as the Kurds and Persians. They are still fully governed by the ancient biblical law. Some of these people divorce their wives for no criminal or moral reason but for other causes which are regarded as justifying divorce. Among these causes are not bearing children, not working hard, not having found favor in a husband's eyes, looking at other men. If any interference should come from religious authorities, a small bribe of a lamb, a chicken, or two pounds of sugar would be sufficient to appease these authorities and obtain their consent. For unknown ages, Eastern women have been degraded and regarded as man's property, at times even bought and sold in open markets. Divorces are so easy and frequent that religious laws have been instituted to remedy

the situation.¹⁷

Jesus condemned the practice of husbands abandoning their wives for any arbitrary reason. He did not approve the lax laws which favored Eastern men. Therefore Jesus' consideration about divorce was very strict. This was so that Eastern women could find protection and not be put out in the streets.

There is no doubt about it: Jesus championed women's rights. This is also the reason that the apostle Paul in his letters says that in Christ (through Jesus' teaching) there is neither male nor female. This discrimination was to end through the powerful gospel of Jesus.

EASTERN LAWS

Because of the ease with which a husband may divorce in the Near East,¹⁸ specific laws were instituted to make divorce more difficult. For example, if a husband should divorce his wife for no reason and then realize he made a mistake, to get her back legally he first has to find a husband for his divorced wife. His wife, would then live with her new husband for two or three months. When that specific period ended, the woman would obtain divorce papers so that she might remarry her first husband. This law acted as a deterrent against rash, impulsive divorces.

The above-mentioned legislation derives from Koranic law. Men of Islamic faith were not so quick to divorce their wives, knowing that they had to give their wives in marriage to a new husband. It was embarrassing and extremely humiliating. Nonetheless, in Northern Iraq, the Kurds, who are also

¹⁷George M. Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, p. 38.

¹⁸In certain Near Eastern areas a husband simply has to say "I divorce you" three times and the divorce becomes final.

members of Islam, found a way around the law.

If a Kurdish man should divorce his wife and then wants to take her back, the woman is immediately married to a goat or to an ox. After the marriage ceremony and without delay the townspeople kill the ox or goat. The newlywed has now become a widow and goes into mourning. When the time of mourning ceases, she remarries her former husband. All is well!¹⁹

JESUS' TEACHING

In the section of the New Testament that we call *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus taught many subjects based on Semitic thinking. For example, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."²⁰

Resisting evil only increases the power of evil. "To turn the other cheek" is an Aramaic idiom and means "learn to take the wind out of the other person's sails," or "do not augment the difficulty." In English we would say, "Nip it in the bud." In other words, don't retaliate! It will only encourage more drastic reprisals.

The psychology behind this teaching is to weaken and lessen the "evil" force that may come against the individual. How? By not resisting the evil, it cannot escalate. For instance, if one person should say something provocative to another and anger that individual to strike back with force, then a fight might result. Better to turn the other cheek and not respond to the verbal provocation. Jesus did not teach one to

¹⁹See Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, p. 39.

²⁰Mt. 5:38-39, KJV.

behave cowardly. Truly, it takes more inner strength not to retaliate. It is better to settle a problem in peace than with more sharp words and use of force.

CIVIL LAWSUITS

"And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also."²¹ Small-time thieves generally steal garments and shoes from homes and fields. According to ancient laws and customs, when authorities haul a man to court who is under suspicion, they take his garments as a bond. Sometimes innocent men find themselves accused of being bandits and dragged before the officials. If the men receive a guilty sentence and have no financial means to help themselves, then the officials will confiscate their apparel.

Clothes are also accepted as collateral for loans. When individuals fail to make their payments, creditors are willing to accept clothing instead of payment. If at any time a man should resist giving his robe, he will not only lose his robe and shirt, but he shall receive severe punishment. The creditor will also take many other garments owned by the unfortunate man.

Dr. Lamsa renders the above verse as: "And if anyone wishes to sue you at the court and take away your shirt, let him have your robe also."²² According to old Near Eastern customs, Easterners wear at one time many shirts and robes, one over another, in summer and winter. "A man generally wears all the garments he owns because in the East his social standing is determined by the number of clothes he wears."²³

Jesus meant that it is better to surrender your shirt and

²¹Mt. 5:40, KJV.

²²Mt. 5:40, Lamsa Translation.

²³Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, p. 41.

your robe than to lose everything. Again, Jesus stresses the principle of nonresistance. When we resist an evil (trouble) we compound the difficulty. However, this does not mean one must take unnecessary abuse and allow others to totally disregard his or her rights.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

"Whoever compels you to carry a burden for a mile, go with him two."²⁴ Once more, Jesus emphasizes his principle of not resisting an injustice. As in days of yore and in some areas of the Near East today where modern modes of transportation are not in use, men, women, and animals carry food supplies and materials. At times, men and women must carry wheat and other foods at least 15 to 25 miles or more. Men may also carry military supplies from one town to another; that is, the townsfolk from one city carry the supplies to the next one. At the next town military leaders will then select new recruits to continue carrying the supplies until they reach their destination. These officials immediately free those who do not resist the forced labor or release them in the nearest town.

Men and women who are willing to carry these enforced burdens learn quickly not to resist. Others who oppose the forced labor and refuse to carry anything will have to carry burdens for three days or more. The enforcers may also beat them and not release them for a very long time. Willingness to go more than a mile may provide an opportunity for the individual not to go any miles at all, or at least a short distance.²⁵

²⁴Mt. 5:41, KJV.

²⁵Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, p. 42.

LOVE, BLESS, DO GOOD, AND PRAY

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.²⁶

When an Easterner has an enemy, he believes his enemy is also an enemy of God. In the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) the people believed that Israel's enemies were also the enemies of Israel's God. Any individual who does anything truly evil or bad to someone will receive curses upon his head. Usually, in the name of God, an Easterner will call forth curses upon his adversary. The cursing is in retaliation for the wrong that his enemy did to him. There is an example of this kind of cursing in one of the Psalms. It reads:

Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise; For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me; . . . and they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Set thou a wicked man over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand [Idiom: let bad counsel guide him]. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned; and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be continually vagabonds and beg; let them seek their bread also out of desolate places. Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let the strangers spoil his labour. Let there be none to extend mercy unto him; neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name

²⁶Mt. 5:43–45, KJV.

be blotted out. Let them be before the Lord continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. Because that he remembered not to shew mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart. And as he loved cursing, so let it come unto him as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him.²⁷

We can now understand what Jesus meant when he said: "Bless anyone who curses you." It is difficult for us to understand how such a psalm could be present in holy Scripture. But here again we need to consider Near Eastern temperament and psychology. Dr. Rihbany tells us:

This mixture of piety and hatred, uttered so naively and in good faith, is characteristically Syrian. Such were the mutual wishes I so often heard expressed in our neighborhood and clan fights and quarrels in Syria. When so praying, the persons would beat upon their breasts and uncover their heads, as signs of the total surrender of their cause to an avenging Omnipotence. Of course the Syrians are not so cruel and heartless as such imprecations, especially when cast in cold type, would lead one to believe. I am certain that if the little children of his enemy should become fatherless, the imprecator himself would be among the first to "favor" them. If you will keep in mind the juvenile temperament of the Oriental [Semite], already mentioned, and his habit of turning to God in all circumstances, as unreservedly as a child turns to his father, your judgment of the son of Palestine will be greatly tempered with mercy.

The one redeeming feature in these imprecatory petitions is that they have always served the Oriental [Semite] as a safety valve. Much of his wrath is vented in this manner. He is much more cruel in his word than in his deeds. As a rule the Orientals quarrel much, but fight little. By the time two antagonists have cursed and reviled each other so

²⁷Ps. 109:1-17, KJV.

profusely they cool off and thus graver consequences are averted. The Anglo-Saxon has outgrown such habits. In the first place the highly complex social order in which he lives calls for much more effective methods for the settling of disputes, and, in the second place, he has no time to waste on mere words. And just as the Anglo-Saxon smiles at the wordy fights of the Oriental, the Oriental shudders at the swiftness of the Anglo-Saxon using his fists and his pistol. Both are needy of the grace of God.²⁸

LOVE YOUR ENEMY

Jesus encourages his compatriots to love their enemies and bless those who may curse them. This teaching of Jesus is the very core of his dynamic principles. He knew that only the powerful energy of love can truly disarm and dispel a so-called enemy. When one loves an enemy, he has no enemy.

One cannot legislate to make anyone practice love, especially an enemy. Nonetheless, Jesus understood that only love from each individual soul could heal hatreds and resentments. Each individual must look to his/her own heart and find the wellspring of love and spiritual strength that resides within him/herself. When we practice this kind of love, we truly find God.

No wonder Jesus said that God lets His sun shine on the good and the bad, and lets His rain fall on the just and unjust. We do not know our capacity to love until we find ourselves in a situation that may call for the depths of love from our own souls.

Love is a powerful antidote for human ills — it doesn't make any difference what kind of human malady. Love is the only remedy for us mentally, physically, and spiritually.

²⁸Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, Chapter II, "Imprecations," pp. 94-95.

THE SEMITIC TERM "LOVE"

"Love" in Aramaic is *hooba*. In Matthew 5:44 the word "love" grammatically speaking is in the imperative form *ahiw*. It comes from the Semitic root *haw* or *hav* and it means "to warm," "to kindle," "to set on fire." In Hebrew the word is *ahab*. The following is from my book *The Message of Matthew*:

In the Semitic languages of Aramaic and Hebrew, this word has many shades of meaning. The word "love" as it is translated in this verse refers to being warm toward, kindly, amicable, that is, "to be well-disposed toward." Here it does not imply sentimentality or ardent affection. "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink."²⁹ Anyone, then, actualizing this kind of attitude and disposition toward an "enemy" has no "enemy." Jesus constantly stressed the highest ideals in a human being so that humankind may practice peace and reconciliation. Hatred and vengeance only breed more hatred and vengeance, but love nourishes and encourages the finest in human beings.³⁰

Jesus was practical in his teaching. The kind of love of which he spoke does not refer to human sentiment but to a deep care and concern for others. Again, Jesus always called upon the best and finest in a human being. A pragmatic practice of love in the human family is the only answer to hatred and prejudice.

COMIC AND HUMOROUS ELEMENTS IN SCRIPTURE

Semitic psychology would not be complete without a look

²⁹Prov. 25:21, KJV.

³⁰Rocco A. Errico, *The Message of Matthew, An Annotated Parallel Aramaic-English Gospel of Matthew*, Chapter 5, verse 44, footnote 41, p. 19.

at the humorous side of biblical episodes. In my lectures throughout the U. S., Canada, and Europe, I usually point out some of the comic and humorous narratives of the Bible. Most attendees are surprised and delighted; others are a bit offended at the idea of humor existing in sacred writings. Interestingly, Scripture itself testifies to the notion that even God laughs.³¹

Biblical humor presents a challenge for both reader and interpreter. Its humor is unique, subtle, and therefore, somewhat elusive. There is some humor that is blatant. An interpreter must exercise caution in detecting what the author actually intends as farcical and what is not.

The difficulties of evaluating biblical humour are exacerbated by the awareness that, next to the inhibiting reverence for biblical texts, there lurks the methodological dilemma of veering between textual intentionality and reader's reception/response. And this question, an essential one for contemporary literary criticism, is especially significant in the case of any discourse on humour.³²

Nevertheless, textual critics now realize that "comic presentation was much more widespread in the ancient Near East than hitherto believed."³³ Again, another challenge is the fact that what might be amusing to the biblical author may not necessarily be funny or humorous to the reader or interpreter. Literary humor classifies as satire, farce, parody, wit, irony, sarcasm, burlesque, caricature, comedy, travesty, and word play. Of course, this classification of literary humor is not complete. Nonetheless, it does give us a general idea of what exists in biblical literature. The following are but a few instances of

³¹Ps. 2:4; 37:13; 59:8.

³²A. Brenner and Y. T. Radday, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, "Between Intentionality and Reception: Acknowledgment and Application," p. 13.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 16.

scriptural humor.

JONAH AND THE WHALE

The Aramaic and Hebrew literary style is wonderfully entertaining in the book of Jonah. Constant repetition of certain Semitic terms, parallel contrasting poetic lines, along with subtle and overt wit, characterize the author's technique. Even the personal name "Jonah" is a clever portrayal of the prophet's contradictory human temperament.

"Jonah" means "dove." And, his disposition was anything but "dove-like." He disobeys the Lord (*Yahweh*) God, resists the divine commission, boards a ship and flees to Tarshish (Spain). Furthermore, when Jonah does obey and makes his prediction of doom to the Ninevites, he is sorry that the Assyrians repent (turn to God). He becomes angry because God does not destroy the city and its inhabitants. His reputation as a prophet is more important to him than the lives of thousands of people. Next, God has to teach this disloyal prophet a lesson by using a worm.

And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.³⁴

One humorous incident after another occurs in this book. When the Ninevites repented, not only did they fast and put on sackcloth, but their "beasts, herds, and flocks" did the same. The cattle cried to God with groaning. The opening lines of the book clearly show the humorous intent of the author. Note that

³⁴Jonah 4:6-7, KJV.

I use italics for contrast, repetition, and emphasis:

Now the word of the Lord
came to Jonah [Dove]
the son of Matthew, saying:
Arise,
go to Nineveh, the great city
and preach against it;
Because their evildoing
has come up *before my presence*.
So Jonah [Dove] *arose*
to flee to Tarshish [Spain]
from the presence of the Lord.
Then he *went down* to Joppa
and found a ship going to Tarshish.
So he paid his fare
and *went down* into the ship
to go with them to Tarshish
to flee from the presence of the Lord.³⁵

Reading these verses in Aramaic and Hebrew is enjoyable both for the sounding of the words and their meanings. I attempted to render in English as much as possible the flow and force of the Semitic style. These contrasts stay with the reader throughout the book.

God commanded Jonah to "*arise and go*"; instead he "*arose and fled*." Jonah "*went down*" to Joppa and "*went down*" into the hold of the ship. Later he "*goes down*" into the belly of the large fish. Evil doings come "*before* the presence of the Lord," but the prophet flees "*from* the presence of the Lord."

As the story continues, the Lord *hurls* a strong wind (tempest) into the sea; the mariners become frightened and *hurl* the cargo into the sea. And, finally they *hurl* Jonah into the

³⁵Jonah 1:1-3, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

sea. During the tempest (before the sailors throw Jonah overboard) the ship decides to come apart and break itself up. That is, the ship is having a nervous breakdown. The book's rhythmic pacing and humorous movement remain steady, much to the joy of the reader. Not only does the book entertain, but it also teaches a spiritual lesson.³⁶ There is still more.

In conclusion, I would like to show you one more scriptural passage from Jonah. "Now Yahweh had appointed a large fish; and it *gulped* Jonah *down*. And Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."³⁷ In the Semitic text, this line is humorous from beginning to end. As I have mentioned above, the scribe literally penned the entire book in a comic Near Eastern form of writing. However, it loses much of its subtle wit in translation.

Note that the text says: "Yahweh had appointed a large *fish*." Grammatically, in this verse "fish" is in the masculine gender—a he-fish (*dag*). But in the scriptural passage immediately following this one, it says: "And Jonah was in the stomach of the *fish*," but "it" (*the fish* in Hebrew only) is written in the feminine gender—a she-fish (*daga*). The implied jest is that after the he-fish had gulped down his meal (Jonah), it had become female. Why? Because the fish carried Jonah in her stomach as if she were pregnant for three days and three nights. The passage also says that Yahweh had made an appointment with the large fish (not a "whale")³⁸ to swallow Jonah. This narrative is so replete with humor that an entire chapter would not be sufficient to cover the details. It needs a small book.

³⁶See Chapter Three, *Mysticism*, "Jonah," pp. 59–62, for the biblical author's lesson.

³⁷Jonah 1:17, Hebrew Masoretic text, Errico translation.

³⁸The term "whale" is a New Testament English rendering of the story.

ESTHER AND ISAAC

Many other biblical events are presented in ancient, sophisticated humor. The book of Esther is on par humorously with Jonah. Most readers do not realize that Esther's account is not only humorous but also fictitious. "More obvious signs of fiction lie in the comedic hyperbole that permeates the text. The scroll also parodies Persian authority."³⁹ Jews observe the feast of Purim⁴⁰ using Esther as the historical backdrop for their celebration.

There are also amusing biblical pseudonyms and genuine personal names that are humorous. "Isaac," the son of Abraham and Sarah, means "he laughs." The joke here is that Isaac never laughs in his lifetime, but has many ironical things happen to him so that others laugh.

Before he was born, both his parents laughed on two separate occasions when God announced they were to have a boy.⁴¹ "And Sarah said, God has made me laugh exceedingly today; everyone that hears the joyful news will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Because I have borne him a son in his

³⁹Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine and Ernest S. Freirichs, eds., *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* — Edward L. Greenstein, "A Jewish reading of Esther" p. 227. "After a strenuous attempt to find some historical validity in the narrative, Robert Gordis must admit 'clearly the Book of Esther is not a historical work in the modern sense of the term. It represents a traditional reworking of what may well have been a historical incident.' (Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther—A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," p. 386, from the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Also Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 34, says that the book of Esther is "a comic fantasy utilizing pseudo-historical material."

⁴⁰A Jewish festival celebrated on the 14th and 15th of the month of Adar (i.e., the 12th month of the Babylonian calendar and corresponding to March-April).

⁴¹See Gen. 17:15–17 and 18:10–15.

old age."⁴² And that is how Isaac received his name "he laughs": because his parents laughed.

Hebrew Bible authors and scholars J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee believe that many biblical narratives are involved with comedy and tragedy. They teach that the narrative of Isaac is a comic vision and follows the story line of a comedy. They inform us that the book of Genesis interrupts the flow of Isaac's short account with ethnic humor.

Before Abraham and Sarah have their long awaited son, the major story line is complicated twice more. First, the rather dreary story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the partial rescue of Lot and his family interrupts the main flow of the narrative, yet it still serves to reinforce the structural and thematic configuration of the surrounding stories. It functions in particular as a kind of parodied replay of such themes as unexpected divine visitors, equivocal human response marked more by incredulity than faith, and births of national ancestors. Moreover, as E. M. Good has noted, the story is not without its comical moments: for example, 'Lot's ludicrous delay is comically ironic' (p. 94). More germane to the birth story of Isaac is the etiological tale of Moabite and Ammonite origins: the kinship between Israel and its closet neighbors is recognized—they are cousins; yet the quality of the kinship is undercut because Moab and Ammon are the products of an incestuous union. Such use of an invented story about the questionable origins of one's hated relatives is a stock-in-trade strategy of ethnic humour. In fact, according to Fyre, 'the possibilities of incestuous combinations form one of the minor themes of comedy.'⁴³

⁴²Gen. 21:6–7, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁴³J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," pp. 124–25, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, editors: Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner.

CONCLUSION

Why have we not had more studies on humor? Yehuda T. Radday, Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at the Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, puts it so succinctly:

Thus, it would seem that the Jewish God enjoys a good joke and delights in his people's wit; that for Judaism, wit and religion are not incompatible; and that there is not a bit of *lèse majesté* in searching the Scriptures for it. Actually, a considerable number of passages become clear only when read in this light.

Yet things are not so easy. It is a lamentable fact that from the fifth century CE on, the Rabbis' enterprising and entertaining approach to the Bible decreased and God stopped feeling amused by smart solutions of legal problems invented by the faithful. In any case, he did not show his amusement any longer or, perhaps, no smart solutions were suggested to him anymore. A humour-devastating period of deification of Scripture, a veritable bibliolatriy, set in. Within Jewry, too, the book became literarily and literally smothered with reverence. The date is significant. It more or less coincides with the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the Roman empire and with numerous Church Councils where fine points of theology were decided. . . .⁴⁴

⁴⁴Y. T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible," p. 37, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*.

CHAPTER 6

The Sixth Key Biblical Symbolism

The Sixth Key, symbolism, has three categories: parables, metaphors, and poetic philosophy. Aramaic and Hebrew are very visual languages. Their alphabets have 22 letters, and each consonant developed from a picture form (pictograph).

For instance, the consonant "A," *aleph*, represents God. Assyrians worshipped the ox. Thus, when they formed the letter "A" they drew an ox head. The letter "B," *beth*, means house, home, and family. "C" ("G" in Aramaic and Hebrew), *gamal*, represents food and transportation. These Semitic languages are very flowery, picturesque, and significantly symbolic.¹ Let us look into the first division under symbolism: parables.

SPEAKING IN PARABLES

"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake he not unto them."² The Aramaic word *pelatha* means "parables," "proverbs," "allegories," and "illustrations." Near Easterners make "no distinction between a proverb and a parable."³

Teaching and carrying on a conversation in parables, proverbs, and illustrations is characteristic of Semites. Wise

¹The same holds true for Arabic.

²Mt. 13:34, KJV.

³A. M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 140.

men, wazirs, court officials, rabbis, prophets, teachers and politicians always make use of parables in their debates and lectures. Merchants and clients, while bargaining, often mention a few parables.

Eastern poets and musicians sing parables, proverbs, and riddles as they play their musical instruments. "I will incline my ear to parables; I will sing my proverbs upon the harp."⁴ Telling parables was a common way of communicating among Easterners and remains so to this very day. Illustrated speech is very precious to them and they all enjoy it. To an Eastern mind it is poetic, mystical, and very social.

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

A parable is verbal imagery which portrays and illustrates an event or teaching. The main purpose of a parable is "to convey an impression and not to construct definitions or establish dogmas."⁵ Eastern teachers told parables to test their listeners and to study their reactions to the stories. This was the case with the prophet Nathan who had to expose King David for committing adultery and murder.⁶

A skilled Semitic orator or teacher uses many parables to illustrate the same point. He repeats his lesson over and over until he is absolutely certain his words have made an indelible impression on the minds of his students or listeners. The Aramaic and Hebrew styles of writing and speaking are intense, colorful, descriptive, and imaginative. These speakers are outstanding storytellers, holding their listeners to the last detail.

⁴Ps. 49:4, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁵ See A. M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 140.

⁶See 2 Sam. 12:1-7.

Simultaneously imparting spiritual ideas and being entertaining was an art the people welcomed. Jesus no doubt held his hearers spellbound with his parables. He was an entertaining Eastern speaker, a true son of the Near East. And as the gospel writer tells us: ". . . and without parables he did not speak to them."

PARABLES AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

No doubt there were varying beliefs regarding the kingdom of heaven and the coming messianic rule. Some teachers taught that God would have nothing to do with sinners and that the Most High dwelt in the heavens far above them. The only way to appease God's wrath and to atone for one's sins was through animal sacrifices. As far as we know, the common folk did not understand the spiritual aspects of the kingdom of God.

Many religious leaders also believed that the messianic kingdom was to be a political domain ruled by God and enforced through the Messiah's military might and power. Evidently, very few fully grasped the spiritual significance of the kingdom.

A materialistic viewpoint of the kingdom came about through literal, sectarian, and traditional interpretation of holy Scripture. And there existed many conflicting interests in the different belief systems of that era.⁷ Some groups looked for political liberation, while others were satisfied with their present conditions under Herod and Rome's leadership.

Jesus spoke in parables to clarify the different aspects of the kingdom and to change the prevailing notions about God

⁷Modern Bible scholars both Jewish and Christian now understand that there was no such thing as a normative Jewish faith during this period. They refer to the different religious beliefs of Israel's faith as "Judaisms."

and His kingdom. For example, many taught that the kingdom would come suddenly, in a twinkle of an eye, but Jesus understood that the kingdom would not manifest instantaneously. So he composed several parables to illustrate the idea that the kingdom would come gradually. This spiritual domain would come only as the living word of the kingdom rooted itself in the very souls of the people and their leaders. He knew that an inner revolution of the heart and mind must take place for the kingdom to establish itself.

THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The parables that teach the above ideas of the kingdom are as follows: 1. the parable of the sower (the parable of the seed in Aramaic), Mt. 13:3-9; 2. the parable of the mustard seed, Mt. 13:31-32; 3. the parable of the leaven, Mt. 13:33. Jesus also understood that men would have to search diligently and surrender completely for the truth of the kingdom. To illustrate this idea he told his disciples about the pearl of great price, Mt. 13:45-46. Then he told them three more parables to illustrate God's loving care and concern for all humankind including those who had lost their way. These three parables are: The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Prodigal Son), Lk. 15:1-32.

A MISUNDERSTANDING

"And the disciples came, and said unto him, why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the

kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."⁸

Unintentionally, many students and interpreters of the Bible misinterpret this saying of Jesus. They usually understand it to mean that Jesus spoke in parables to hide the *truth* of his teaching. Some expositors even suggest that Jesus didn't want the common folk to know the secret of his kingdom. They believe that his teachings were for a "select" group. But this can hardly be true.

Parables were the common means of communication in the Near East. The main purpose of a parable was "to convey an impression, and not to construct definitions or establish dogmas." Eastern teachers spoke in parables to illustrate ideas and emphasize certain points.

When Jesus' disciples wondered why their master didn't explain the mysteries of the kingdom to others in the same manner that he taught them, his reply was: ". . . to you it is given to know . . . but it is not given to them." This is where most interpreters misunderstand what Jesus meant. To help make it clearer, I will paraphrase the words of Jesus.

The idea would read like this: "You hear my teachings every day because you travel with me and remain at my side. You may ask any question you like, so you can understand the secrets of the kingdom. But I am with the crowds only a short time, and some of them will not hear me again. So I teach them in a way they can understand and remember—through my parables. They will remember my stories of the kingdom."

The common folk were subject to the teachings and interpretations of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Elders, and Scribes. The masses were not as fortunate as his disciples, who could see and hear him continually. This is the reason Jesus told his disciples: "But as for you, blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For truly I say to you, a great

⁸Mt. 13:10–11, KJV.

many prophets and righteous men have longed to see what you see and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."⁹

Jesus' parables were simple and direct. From the very beginning of his ministry, he attempted to explain the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. He revealed the inner truth that was hidden from the hearts and minds of religious authorities and people.

EDEN, ADAM AND EVE

Genesis, Chapters Two and Three, are the Adam and Eve narrative. This tale is a Torah parable and not a myth. Within the parable there are many figures of speech that we have interpreted literally. It is a story of paradise on earth and is a most favorable beginning for humankind.¹⁰

Despite how one chooses to interpret the Adam and Eve account, we can understand it better when we realize that it is a parable. In reality, God did not create a tree and say: "Do not touch it." *Elohim*-God, who is all-knowing, would not need to test His human creation to learn how this creature would behave. The narrative is an existential tale that explains existence as it now is. How does one know that the story of Adam and Eve is a parable?

THE TELLTALE SIGNS

The style of writing and use of metaphors in the story of

⁹Mt. 13:16-17, Lamsa translation.

¹⁰As an aside, the term "garden" in Semitic languages metaphorically means a "wife."

Adam and Eve tell us that we are reading a primeval event described in parable form. How can one imagine that the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God would not know where Adam and Eve were hiding? The author of the tale informs us that God, in the cool of the evening, went looking for them. As the Lord God passed through His garden, He kept calling to them: "Adam, where are you? Adam, where are you?" In the new Testament, Jesus said that God knows when a sparrow falls and knows the number of hairs on our heads. And yet, the Lord God didn't know where the only humans were?

Again, the author tells us that the Lord God was also surprised to learn that Adam and his wife had been eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. "And the Lord God said to Adam, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" Adam, not willing to take the responsibility for his act, replies to the Lord: "The *woman* whom *thou* gavest to be with me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree, and I did eat." Adam not only blamed Eve but also the Lord God for having given him that woman.

And when the Lord God turned to the woman, she replied: "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat." Then the Lord God addresses the snake and says: "Because you have done this thing, cursed are you above cattle, and above all beasts of the field; on your belly shall you go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life."

If the reader accepts this record as a historical event, it appears ridiculous for an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent deity to behave this way. What we need to realize is that the Torah parable is just that — a parable, a story. The author describes God's questioning of his human creations in rhetorical terms. It is typical parental rhetoric.

These are just a few of the details of how we come to know the tale is a parable. To understand it in any other light,

or to make it theological, is to destroy its simplicity and create a horror in our minds and hearts.

MISTAKEN NOTIONS

At some time in the tenth century B.C.E., a Hebrew scribe penned the famous legend of Adam and Eve. In the book of Genesis it follows the prose poem of creation. Most of the time this ancient literary piece suffers from improper and negative interpretations that are mistaken notions about the meaning of the narrative. This narrative has often been viewed as dealing with the "The Fall of Man," "Original Sin," "The Origin of Evil," "The Origin of Death," and "The Evils of Sexual Union."

Knowledgeable experts in Hebrew Scripture and scholars of ancient Near Eastern history no longer hold these so-called theological ideas as tenable. "But one must avoid the mistake of viewing this 'original sin' in terms of a universal and abstract notion of sin. Such a concept is not found in the Old Testament."¹¹ This notion is Church doctrine and became part of Christian beliefs.¹²

Again, we must keep in mind that the narrative is a Torah parable. It is not a description of history. The Semitic writer, through his tale, tells how the first couple nearly achieved immortality for humankind. Nevertheless, while they did not gain immortality for humanity, they did find something else. They obtained knowledge — for a price.

¹¹Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11, A Commentary*, p. 277.

¹²However the first glimpse of this idea comes to us during post-biblical times (between testaments). In the apocryphal book of Esdras, a passage expounds Gen. 2-3 as a story of Adam's sin which was passed on to his descendants. Later, in his letter to the Romans, Paul continues with this notion.

Another point to consider is the narrative's ancient Near Eastern setting with its common religious ideas and motifs. Although no historian has found any parallel story to the Adam and Eve narrative, the Hebrew account does share familiar themes with certain Ugarit, Canaanite, and Mesopotamian tales. Immortality and knowledge (wisdom) were the major themes recorded in these primitive myths and legends. The author of Genesis 2-3 describes the two common Eastern motifs in metaphoric language. He calls them the "tree of life" and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Another mistaken notion is the cursing scene. Did the Lord God curse Adam and Eve for their transgression? Does all humanity suffer because of the misdeed of these two individuals? Upon whom did God put a curse?

"The Lord [Yahweh] God said to the serpent: Concerning this thing you have done, *cursed are you* among all cattle, and among all wild animals; on your belly shall you slither, and dust shall you eat your whole life long. . . . To the woman he said: I will increase greatly your pains in childbearing, in pain you shall be dependent upon your husband and he shall rule over you. . . . Then to the man he said. . . . *cursed is the ground* because of you. . . ."¹³

As one can see from the above passages of Scripture, *Yahweh* God did not curse the woman or the man. God only put a curse on the serpent and the ground. The idea of the wife's position as dependent upon her husband is not a punishment. The subordinate position of the wife had to do with the social customs of the times. This verse explains women's social status after the fact. It did not create the status; it only confirms it. And, to embellish his tale, the writer adds the idea of pain during pregnancy and birth as penalties.

Nevertheless, according to the latest biblical findings and

¹³Gen. 3:14, 16-17, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

scholarly research, verses 14–19 in Chapter Three were not a part of the original structure of the legend.¹⁴ In an older form of the tale, expulsion from the garden followed right after *Yahweh* God discovered their disobedience and heard their defense. Exile from Eden was the original and only penalty placed on the man and the woman. The penalties mentioned in verses 14–19 have no direct relationship to the offense that they had committed. What these verses factually describe is the present state of existence of the serpent, woman, and man. And, by way of after-thought, the Torah author or scribe added them as further penalties. It accurately describes existential challenges present in living as human beings on this earth.¹⁵

THE VILIFICATION OF WOMEN

Did the Lord (*Yahweh*) God curse Eve? Was Eve a temptress? And was she ultimately responsible for all the woes and difficulty that humanity faces today? Let us examine more closely the verses and assumptions that stem from this famous tale. Remember, this is a sacred story that conveys certain ideas. It is a Near Eastern parable, not a report.

The view that this tale establishes women in a basically temptress role is grossly inaccurate. The thought that God cursed all women because a woman ate some fruit from a forbidden tree is another fallacious perception. Truly, these notions have become exceedingly harmful religious interpretations of biblical text. Hebrew Scripture does not portray Eve as a temptress:

¹⁴According to the rules of ancient narrative art it is a pretty certain sign that two originally independent accounts of the expulsion have come together." Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11, A Commentary*, p. 274. See also footnote 15.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 258–67.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasing to the eyes, and that the tree was delightful to look at, she took the fruit of it, and did eat, and she also gave to her husband with her, and he did eat.¹⁶

Note that the verse says "she also gave to her husband *with her*." Evidently, Adam was present and watching the scene between the "woman" and the "serpent."

There is also another clue that points to the fact that Adam was with the "woman" during the alluring conversation with the serpent. In the original Semitic text (both Aramaic and Hebrew) the serpent uses the plural form when addressing the woman. "And the serpent said to the woman, You [pl.—*tmuaton*] absolutely shall not die; for God knows that in the day you [pl.—*aton*] eat of it, your eyes shall be opened and you [pl.—*aton*] shall become like God knowing everything."¹⁷ The story makes it clear that both the man and woman made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit.

"Original Sin" as an article of Church creed also contributed to the erroneous and horrendous notion that women, by nature, are maleficent. During the Middle Ages it helped instigate an unbelievable vilification of women. It made her the authoress of death and all earthly woe.

Judaism instead of teaching the "Fall of Man," teaches the "Rise of Man"; and instead of "Original Sin," it stresses "Original Virtue." The term "Original Virtue" means the beneficent hereditary influence of righteous ancestors upon their descendants. It also teaches that all children are destined

¹⁶Gen. 3:6, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

¹⁷Gen. 3:4-5, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

to help in the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.¹⁸

Interestingly, some Christian Bible teachers call attention to the point that Jesus never refers to "Original Sin" or to the so-called "Fall of Man." We have no mention in the gospels of the "Fall of Man." What we do find in the gospels is Jesus encouraging his followers to become like children so that they might enter the kingdom of heaven. If children are "born in sin," why would Jesus teach his disciples to become like them?

THE PROPHET HOSEA

Did the Lord God of Israel instruct Hosea to take a "wife of whoredom"? Then, a second time, command him to take an adulterous woman for a wife? According to the book of Hosea, the Lord did order the prophet to marry an adulteress and a harlot. But what Hosea wrote is not a historical event. Instead, it was a parable that the prophet composed.

Through his parable, Hosea describes Israel and Judah as harlots who had abandoned the law of Moses, their God, and made alliances with foreign nations. Mosaic law forbade prostitution. Harlots were stoned. Hosea, being a holy man, would not have found a harlot and taken her as a wife. But he could do this action in a parable, and it was understood as such.¹⁹

Through metaphoric and allegorical language, the prophet showed that both Israel and Judah had departed from their God and their religion. They were doomed. The very same nations upon whom they relied for safety and security

¹⁸See Dr. J. H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, additional notes from *The Pentateuch and Haftorah Commentaries*, p. 196.

¹⁹George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, pp. 862-63.

would destroy them. Israel's and Judah's unfaithfulness to the principles of their ancestors and law of Moses is depicted graphically. Hosea wrote in this style so that even the simple farmer, shepherd, fisherman, and country folk could understand the predicament in which the two nations were caught. Let us examine the second division under symbolism: Metaphors or Figures of Speech.

FIGURATIVE SPEECH

Easterners use metaphors extensively in their everyday speech. Metaphoric usage is not limited to Eastern languages alone. Nonetheless, an Easterner's employment of metaphors is greater than that of Westerners. We especially find this true in biblical communication.

For example, Scripture often pictures great noblemen as trees and as the cedars of Lebanon. It also symbolizes nations as animals. Imperial nations in particular become lions, bears, and leopards. Smaller, weaker nations with no large military might become lambs, sheep, and goats.

Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, is totally symbolic, and must not be understood literally. For instance, John saw the Holy City—the New Jerusalem coming down from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. The Holy City is a symbol. It is not a structural city coming down from God out of the sky.²⁰ Prophetically and symbolically it represents the coming of a pious human community, a transformed humanity in heart and mind. This new community of humanity will carry out justice, mercy, love, and compassion for the rest of the human family.

Unfortunately, biblical authors' use of figurative speech

²⁰See Rev. 21:1-2.

has unintentionally created some invalid and mistaken ideas in the Western mind about many Bible subjects. One of these subjects is a so-called heinous supernatural being. His name is Lucifer.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME *LUCIFER*

The following is not a comprehensive study of the many scriptural references to the Devil or Satan. It is a brief study of the origin of Lucifer and not a complete work on Satan's origin. The concept that Satan (the Devil) is an independent evil power no longer residing in heaven but ruling a demonic kingdom and heading for judgment is not present in the Hebrew Bible. These particular notions about the Devil developed during intertestamental times.

Haven't you often asked yourself these questions: "Has a loving God created an evil adversary who tempts us into doing evil?" "Is humankind plagued by a single sinister power that rivals omnipotent God?" "Where did the name Lucifer originate?" "Does he lure people away from truth and justice?" "Does the Bible make references to this evil personage and his fallen collaborators, and by that prove the existence of Lucifer?"

Certain Bible interpreters tell us that God created Lucifer. However, there is absolutely no Scripture that says that God created a supernatural being that turned on Him. Again, some bible teachers claim that Lucifer has a definite history. The story goes something like this:

A rebellion occurred in heaven. Lucifer, a numinous being, had persuaded a third of the angels to join forces with him and fight against the Almighty. This heavenly traitor wanted to usurp God's celestial throne and make himself *God*.

Accordingly, God reacts to the uprising in the same way humans would respond to such a threatening situation. Immediately, the Almighty mobilized his good angels and commanded

Michael, the archangel, to do battle against the dissident horde. War broke out in the celestial realms. Michael quickly defeated Lucifer and cast him and his deviant cohorts out of their heavenly abode. But, alas, this defiant band fell to the unfortunate earth. And now that great celestial combat wages on among the inhabitants of the earth.

This mistaken interpretation of Lucifer's or Satan's origin draws from three major biblical texts. These passages are Isaiah 14:12-16, Ezekiel 28:12-17, and Revelation 12:7-12. A fourth scripture, 2 Peter 2:4, seems to confirm the first three textual passages.

LUCIFER, SON OF THE MORNING

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning? How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou has said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee; saying is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms?²¹

All these verses seem to describe an unearthly event. But what does Isaiah say directly about his own prophetic proverb? In verse four of Chapter 14, the word of Yahweh comes to Isaiah and tells him: "Take up this proverb against *the king of Babylon* and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! The golden city ceased!" Isaiah knew of whom he spoke, it was about the King of Babylon. He does *not* refer to an angelic,

²¹Isa. 14:12-16, KJV.

supernatural force. Furthermore, the prophet uses descriptive Near Eastern metaphors in proclaiming the end of the Babylonian Empire along with its exalted leader and king. Before examining Isaiah's metaphors, let us see what the term "Lucifer" means.

THE TERM "LUCIFER"

"Lucifer" comes from the Hebrew word *helel* and literally means "the shining one." It also translates as "day star" or "morning star." Isaiah represents Nebuchadnezzar's days of power and glory metaphorically as "the morning star." The prophet contrasts the king's former pride and splendor with his serious fall and degradation.

However, the Near Eastern Aramaic text offers us a different rendering of Isaiah's prophecy: "How are you fallen from heaven! *Howl (cry out) in the morning!* For you have fallen down to the ground, O reviler of the nations"²²

The Aramaic word *aelel* means "to shout," "cry out," and "howl." Thus the term "Lucifer" is absent in the original Aramaic manuscript of Isaiah. Interestingly, the Hebrew text uses the term "day star" and not "Lucifer."

WHY METAPHORS?

The abundant use of metaphors is what makes a colorful language and especially so to an Easterner.

Just as the Easterner [Semite] loves to flavor his food strongly and to dress in bright colors, so is he fond of metaphor, exaggeration, and positiveness in speech. . . I

²²Isa. 14:12, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

could wish, however, that the learned theologians had suspected more strongly the literal accuracy of Eastern utterances and had thus been saved from founding a huge doctrinal structure on a figure of speech.²³

One of the many bridges we must cross in attempting to understand Scripture is the Semitic author's extensive use of metaphors. And our study of the origin of Lucifer is no exception. We must realize that the prophets employed idiomatic and symbolic terms of speech in expressing their ideas to their people.

Isaiah describes the fall of the Babylonian monarch in metaphoric terms. He vividly depicts Nebuchadnezzar's loss of power and glory. "How you are fallen from heaven," cries the seer. Remember, Isaiah is not describing the fall of an angelic being. "To fall from heaven" is a Semitic idiom and it characterizes an individual who has lost his once extensive influence. Easterners also understand that when a star "falls from heaven," it signifies that a ruler, leader or potentate has lost his authority and kingdom. (The Book of The Revelation makes many references to falling stars. This shows political and governmental changes, usually the collapse of leadership.)

Isaiah piles one metaphor upon another in his awesome description. Expressions such as: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. . . . I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the most High," are Eastern forms of exaggerated speech. These Eastern style-phrases portray the glory, power, and great influence of an imperial ruler.

In other words, the king's rule is so great that he will ascend into heaven. His throne is so high that he will sit above the stars of God and the heights of the clouds. His reign is so powerful he is like the Most High. But alas, the prophet

²³Abraham M. Ribbany, *The Syrian Christ*, p. 118.

predicts that the king's destiny is *sheol*—i.e., he is doomed to fail and will go the way of all mortals.

EZEKIEL'S METAPHORIC LANGUAGE

The second major passage that some theologians employ to validate the existence of Lucifer is the prophecy of Ezekiel.

Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the King of Tyrus and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God, Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold; the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth and I have set thee so; thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the mist of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee. . . . Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee.²⁴

Again, the reason some biblical authorities explain this passage as referring to an evil, fallen, angelic being is that they interpret the metaphors exactly as written. By reading the above passage of Ezekiel, one can understand the reason that some commentators misconstrued the prophet's metaphoric expressions.

If one should interpret these phrases at face value, then one would ask: "Is Ezekiel writing about a human being?" After

²⁴Ezk. 28:12-17, KJV.

all, one could reason that the King of Tyre was never in Eden. And the king was never an anointed cherub. This is exactly how some biblical commentators reasoned when they concluded that Ezekiel was really writing about a supernatural being.

Experts in studies of the Hebrew Bible do believe that at one time in Israel's ancient history a saga existed concerning a fallen cherub.

All this testifies [Ezk. 28:15-19] to the fact that in a remote period of antiquity there was an Israelite saga that related how the cherub — or one of the cherubs — who dwelt in the garden of Eden, upon the top of the mountain of God, which was as high as the heavens, sinned in his pride against God, and as a punishment for his transgression he was driven out from the garden of Eden and cast down to the earth. It may be that the word *earth* occurs here in the sense of *Sheol* [abode of the dead], in which sense it is also found in Akkadian. This saga, there, [in Ezekiel] belongs to the cycle of legends concerning the angels who were hurled down from Heaven. . . The prophet alludes to this tradition and uses it as a poetic parable for the downfall of the king of Tyre. The Torah, on the other hand, seeks to refine and purify the tradition. The story of the angels who sinned and were punished is not consonant with the spirit of the Pentateuch and is deprecated by it, just as at a subsequent period the sagas of the Talmud expressed opposition to the later legends of a similar character. The angels are all beloved, pure and holy, and the one who sinned in the garden of Eden and was expelled therefrom was not a cherub, nor an angel, but a man.²⁵

We must keep in mind that God instructed Ezekiel to "take up a lamentation over the King of Tyre," and not a lamentation about a fallen angel. Ezekiel uses vivid, dramatic terminology, typical of Near Eastern speakers and writers.

²⁵U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part One, From Adam to Noah*, pp. 81-82.

Umberto Cassuto, a Jewish scholar, explains very clearly Ezekiel's analogy concerning the "garden of God."²⁶

We shall look into the meanings of the prophet's poetic and metaphoric language. "You were the seal of wisdom, and the crown of beauty" means that the king and the city of Tyre had complete, unsurpassed wisdom, for it was a city of perfection. The people of Tyre were builders of magnificent palaces, temples, shrines, and other edifices. They were also makers of articles of great beauty, which many other cities were unable to manufacture. Tyre was never surpassed until modern times for its naval power and for its works of brass, ivory, gold, and silver. Even today, the fine brass of Lebanon is world famous and is exported to many countries.

"Thou wast in Eden." In this metaphor, the author compares Tyre to the earthly paradise of Eden, the garden of God. The land was abundant with water and fertile fields. "The precious stones" refer to the amassed wealth of that ancient city. "The anointed cherub" means the King of Tyre who protected the city.

The passage which says "upon the holy mountain of God" refers to Mount Lebanon because of its great beauty. To be "perfect in thy ways" signifies the city and the king, who did not do anything wrong; they did not covet or invade other lands or countries, and they were content with their own wisdom and trade with other nations.

Remember, this prophecy is a lamentation. The king and the city of Tyre were doomed. They trusted in their own strength and wisdom.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 75-82.

MICHAEL AND THE WAR IN HEAVEN

Let us move on to the third major passage. The following is from The Book of The Revelation.

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out in the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. . . . Therefore rejoice ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.²⁷

The word "revelation" in Aramaic is *gilyana*. *Gala* is the root of the word and means "to reveal," "to uncover," "to predict," and "to foretell." John's scroll of The Revelation is a series of symbolic visions that deal with worldwide issues on both exoteric and esoteric levels.

Metaphysically, it involves the continuing unveiling of the Christ (Messiah) in Jesus, in individuals, in the Church, in the State, and throughout the universe. It contains over one thousand symbols. These symbols point to ideas and events.

According to historical records, early Christians rejected the Book of Revelation. Then, about 395 C.E., it was accepted as part of the New Testament's sacred canon. The final canon was selected at the Council of Carthage.

The point to bear in mind is that the book, with its symbols, must not be understood literally. There was never a war in heaven. This is a throwback on ancient legends. Nor was there a rebellion that God couldn't manage.

²⁷Rev. 12:7-12, KJV.

There are many varying historical and metaphysical interpretations of these verses in the twelfth chapter of the Revelation. According to Eastern symbolism, the dragon represents chaos, earthly power, opposition, and enmity. Pagan rulers from the very beginning were aware of the growth of the Christian movement and its influence on the populace. (The dragon also symbolizes false ideas that one may hold in consciousness.) Michael and his angels and the war in heaven signify the struggle between truth and error. "Angel" in Aramaic means "God's thought" or "God's counsel." In other words, the dragon, the gross deception, the opposition to truth, will be totally defeated.

FALLEN ANGELS

The final area of the Bible that supposedly deals with the origin of Lucifer and his fallen angels is in the epistle of 2 Peter. It says: "For God spared not the angels that sinned but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment."²⁸ Before pursuing Peter's statement further, we need to understand the specialized term "angel" and its usage throughout Scripture.

Again, we are facing Near Eastern imagery and metaphoric phrases, for the term "angels" has many meanings in Semitic tongues. *Malakha* means a "sent one." Therefore, the word signifies a "messenger." Metaphorically, it also refers to ministers-pastors,²⁹ holy men, pious people, sons of God.³⁰ Metaphysically, it refers to God's counsel and thought.

In Psalm 104:4, the composer says that God: "maketh his

²⁸2 Peter 2:4, KJV.

²⁹Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, and 14. The angel of the church is the head minister-pastor.

³⁰See Gen. 6:1-2.

angels spirits; and his ministers a flaming fire." Thus, angels are "spirit," subject neither to sin nor to physical laws. Spirit is intangible and indestructible; therefore no heavenly angels could have "sinned."³¹

Let us return to the verse in the epistle of 2 Peter. The apostle alludes to the short incident related in Genesis.

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said My spirit shall not always strive with man for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.³²

These verses in Genesis have long been verses of great disagreement and controversy among scholars. How does one interpret them? Are we dealing with angelic beings or with pious human beings who went astray?

The late Dr. George M. Lamsa believed that "sons of God" here refers to the descendants of Seth who were good, pious men. But these men of God had decided to break from the lineage of Seth and intermarry with the descendants of Cain. They turned from God, began to worship idols, and adopted strange beliefs.³³

³¹To repeat the words of U. Cassuto: "The story of the angels who sinned and were punished is not consonant with the spirit of the Pentateuch [the first five books of the Bible] and is deprecated by it, just as at a subsequent period the sagas of the Talmud expressed opposition to the later legends of a similar character. The angels are all beloved, pure and holy. . . ." See page 142, and footnote 25 of this book.

³²Gen. 6:1-5, KJV.

³³For an opposite viewpoint, see U. Cassuto, *A commentary on the book of Genesis, Part One, From Adam to Noah*, pp. 290-98. See also his book *Biblical and Oriental Studies, Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, Biblical Studies.

There is no doubt that we are reading a remnant of an ancient legend. Nevertheless, our interest here is to work with the metaphoric terms mentioned in 2 Peter 2:4. "For God spared not the angels that sinned" means the "fallen ones" (whoever they might be) had to suffer the consequences of their own misdirected behavior. "Cast them down into hell" implies that they would suffer for their evil deeds and practices. The deeds themselves backfired on these "fallen ones." "Delivered them into chains of darkness" shows that they would be enslaved to their erroneous ways. Ignorance would hold them in their error and evil actions. Such figurative expressions are well understood in Semitic languages, but we in the West find them difficult to grasp and have created unwarranted teachings of "fallen angels and demons."

Let us now work with the third division of symbolism: poetic philosophy.

POETIC PHILOSOPHY — JOB

The book of Job is a philosophical writing. It attempts to answer a basic human question: "Why do good people suffer?" Its style is poetic and humorous.

It deals with tragic circumstances and presents religious and philosophic arguments. The book is difficult to understand, not only because many verses are not clearly translated, but because numerous idioms and metaphors fill its pages. Job's story is a drama and not an actual case history.

God appears as an Oriental Potentate in the book of Job. Perhaps you have read the book *Anna and the King of Siam* or have seen the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*. In the musical, all the king's children march before him on an appointed day.

Oriental kings have so many children that they do not have the time to see them singly. Therefore these kings have

appointed days when all their children come together to meet with their fathers. There is only one son a king will see apart from all his other children, and that is the crown prince.

The Eastern author depicts God as a monarch receiving his children on an appointed day: "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord. . . ."³⁴ But the author goes on to say that: "And Satan came also among them." *Yahweh* God, instead of carrying on a conversation with his sons, struck up a conversation with Satan. (This does not mean a supernatural being. Satan here means "an accuser—an evil advisor.")

Yahweh (the Lord) asks Satan if he had considered his servant Job. There is not a man like him anywhere. He reveres the Lord God and turns from evil completely. But according to the story, Satan suggests that Job serves and reveres God and rejects evil because God protects him.

The Lord had blessed the works of Job's hands, his household, and everything that was a part of him. But, if all that were to change, the Lord God would see how much Job was faithful to Him. God gave Satan permission to test Job severely, without touching his life.

In the second chapter of Job, the sons of God came to present themselves again, and Satan was with them. *Yahweh* was greatly impressed with Job's faithfulness, although he had lost everything. Job had endured great suffering.

Robbers had raided the oxen and asses, and they had slain many of Job's servants with the edge of the sword. Lightning had struck from heaven and burned up the sheep and the shepherds. Chaldeans had invaded the land, stolen his camels, and slain the remaining servants of Job. His sons and daughters were eating and drinking in their oldest brother's home, when there came a strong wind from the desert, and it

³⁴Job 1:6, KJV.

collapsed the house. The fallen house killed all of Job's sons and daughters.

When Job heard all this terribly tragic news, his reply was: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all these catastrophes Job did not sin nor did he blaspheme against the Lord. *Yahweh* God was very proud of Job and quickly informed Satan: "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, an innocent and upright man, one who reveres God, and turns away from evil? He still holds fast to his integrity, *although you provoked me against him*, to destroy him without cause."

There is some subtle humor in what the Lord God says to Satan: ". . . although you provoked me against him." This means that God says: "The devil made me do it." Of course, in this story Satan does not represent the devil. God took advice from a bad counselor. Remember, this entire episode in Job never happened. It is a drama.

Again, Satan is not impressed and suggests that he should touch Job in some other manner: "Skin for skin, yea, all that a man has will he give for his life, to save it. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his flesh or his bone, and he will curse thee to thy face." Satan's suggestion provoked God a second time. So He allowed this jealous emissary to touch the physical body of Job, and now the poor man broke out with a skin disease. The Aramaic text says "skin cancer."

While Job was suffering so very badly, his wife even taunted him, and with great disdain accusingly spoke: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die." His wife's accusations and taunts did not move Job, who instead replied: "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. We have indeed received God's blessings, now shall we not also receive his afflictions?" In all these great misfortunes Job did not sin nor did he blaspheme against God with his lips.

Now the author begins to develop the philosophical arguments. Job has four friends who come and sit around him while he laments in the ash heap. Job must now argue his way out of his situation with his friends, who accuse him of cheating others. They believe that he is reaping what he has sown. His friends represent the philosophical and religious beliefs of Job's time. At the very end of the story, God restores everything to Job.

Job reached the conclusion that no one was one hundred percent good and perfect. Human beings are enigmatic and prone toward fallibility.³⁵ Therefore we bring disaster upon ourselves, but the grace of God restores us even in the midst of tribulations and afflictions. Job learned humility and not just to trust in his own integrity. His goodness was not sufficient.

Then Job answered the Lord, and said, I know that thou canst do all these things, and that no purpose can be hid from thee. Who am I to think that I can give counsel without knowledge? Therefore thou hast declared to me that I have uttered that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. Hear me, I pray thee, and I will speak; I will ask thee, and declare thou to me: I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee. Therefore, I will keep silent and repent in dust and ashes.³⁶

Job came to a great realization and learned the lesson well. Everything was restored. He had greater wealth than before.³⁷ And now we move to the last key — Amplification.

³⁵For a short discussion of fallibility, see my book *The Mysteries of Creation, The Genesis Story*, "The Enigma," pp. 124–25.

³⁶Job. 42:1–6, Aramaic Peshitta text, Lamsa translation.

³⁷See Job 42:10–17.

CHAPTER 7

The Seventh Key Amplification

Amplification is the final key that helps us unlock Scripture. What do I mean by the term amplification? I chose *amplification* because in our culture *exaggeration* carries a negative implication. We find it very difficult to accept the notion that exaggeration exists in the *sacred book* we call the Bible. Our parents taught us never to exaggerate or tell even a small "white" lie. Then how could a holy book contain embellishments?

In the Near Eastern culture, Semites amplify an event and picturesquely color a situation. This is totally acceptable and agreeable to Eastern listeners. Many passages of the Bible contain exaggerated speech and story amplification. Biblical authors like to amplify so that they may glorify an idea or event.

Another way to express the idea of amplification is through an illustration I use in my lectures. Eastern amplification is like a painting on canvas. When one frames the painting it begins to stand out. The frame helps "amplify" the picture. So it is with various episodes in Scripture. Their authors "frame" the narrative—that is, they "amplify" it.

Dr. Rihbany gives us some insight into this Eastern characteristic:

A Syrian's chief purpose in a conversation is to convey an impression by whatever suitable means, and not to deliver his message in scientifically accurate terms. He expects to be judged not by what he says, but by what he means. . . . It is also because the Syrian loves to speak in pictures, and to subordinate literal accuracy to the total impression of an utterance, that he makes such extensive use of figurative

language. . . . Just as the Oriental [Semite] loves to flavor his food strongly and to dress in bright colors, so is he fond of metaphor, exaggeration, and positiveness in speech. To him mild accuracy is weakness.¹

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

When I first began to work with Dr. George M. Lamsa in 1965, I did not know about this Eastern characteristic. After working with him for a short time, I finally learned not to take what he said at face value. Dr. Lamsa enjoyed making an impression by increasing the numbers. This is also common in the Bible. At different times when I wanted to know the exact situation with the true detail and accuracy, I would use the Aramaic expressions, "*Amen, amen*," or "*sharirareeth, sharirareeth*," "Truly, truly." In essence, what I was saying was: "Tell it to me this time without amplification." I would then receive the information I sought.

In the gospel of John, the author portrays Jesus speaking the Aramaic phrase "*Amen, amen, amarna lkhon*" — "Truly, truly, I say to you."² Eastern speakers use this expression for emphasis. It also means "this is no amplification." The common folk of Palestine expected their teachers and speakers to amplify.

CONTRADICTIONS IN SCRIPTURAL TEXTS

The seeming contradictions we find in various verses of the Bible come from the author's amplification, especially

¹Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, pp. 115–17.

²Literally it reads, "Amen, amen, I am telling you." The other three gospel writers also record the same expression or its equivalent.

regarding numbers and locations. As mentioned earlier, Eastern people do not care for exactness or literal accuracy. To them it makes no difference whether there were two hundred or five hundred people present, or, for that matter, even a thousand people.

This is why we have several varying accounts of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish. One gospel writer says Jesus fed 5,000 men. Another writer says that he fed 4,000 men. Again, it depends on the writer. He flavors the event the way he chooses. What we must realize is that Jesus did feed hungry men, women, and children. The need was met. We do not have to concern ourselves with the exact figure. In the West, we want details. But in the Near East "it does not matter."

THE STORY OF THE RESURRECTION

Jesus' resurrection story has been under fire for a long time. Many modern interpreters have difficulty with the contradictory accounts found in the four gospels. Again, the object of Eastern writers was to tell one and the same story. Their emphasis was that Jesus, as the Messiah, won a victory over the grave and death.

For these gospel writers the event occurred. What remained was for each author to place his own framework (amplification) around the resurrection episode. That is, each would embellish it accordingly.³ This kind of reasoning places serious doubts in the minds of Western readers of the Bible. But an Easterner is not the slightest bit disturbed by any amplified numbers, contradictory events, or change in localities. All four gospels speak of the same event.

³Other interpreters believe that the witnesses were describing the events as they saw them. Therefore, each description would vary because certain things stood out for them and not others.

OTHER EXAMPLES

Eastern speakers also enjoy expressing their ideas in blanket statements and sweeping utterances. You will find these kinds of exaggerated phrases throughout the Bible. For example: "And at even' when the sun did set, they brought unto him *all that were diseased*, and them that were possessed of devils, and *all the city was gathered at the door*." ⁴

In the book of Genesis we find a very fascinating and all-encompassing statement made to a beloved daughter. Abraham sent his servant to Haran to find a wife for his son, Isaac. Eleazar, the servant, arrived in Haran and went among the Arameans. There he met Rebekah at the well. Rebekah and her family were kin to Abraham.⁵

Now Eleazar had completed his transaction with the family for the hand of Rebekah. And, as Rebekah was departing her family and home town, immediately Laban, her brother, and mother blessed her with a blessing. "And they blessed Rebekah, their sister, and said to her, You are our sister, *be the mother of thousands and of millions*, and let your descendants inherit the lands of their enemies."⁶ Can you imagine becoming the mother of thousands and millions?

In the book of Judges, Samson killed "*a thousand soldiers with the jawbone of an ass*." Other passages read: "*the stars of heaven fought from their orbits. They fought from heaven* against Caesara, the enemy of Israel." Abraham's descendants were to be as "*the sand of the seashore and the stars of the universe*." The Lord brought quail from the sea and they fell exhausted to the earth "*three feet high*." One writer says that the walls of the cities of Canaan "*were fenced up to heaven*."

⁴Mk. 1:32-33,KJV.

⁵For the detailed story read Genesis, Chapter 24.

⁶Gen. 24:60, Lamsa translation.

There are many more statements like the above throughout Scripture. As one begins to understand the Eastern style of writing, it will become easier to detect such utterances. Remember, the authors used these expressions to glorify an event and to make an impression. They did not do it to deceive.

DESCRIPTIVE POETRY

Poetic amplification is very beautiful and meaningful. For instance, when people were in deep mourning, Scripture says: "The sun refused to shine, and the moon and the stars no longer gave their light." When Semites enjoyed great peace and happiness: "The mountains danced and the hills leaped and skipped, and the trees clapped their hands." When they wished to express the idea of solemnity, as when Moses received the Ten Commandments: "The mountains shook, the earth trembled, darkness, lightning, thunder, and noises were heard from Mount Sinai."

We must also keep in mind that not all recorded events in Scripture are amplifications. Nor does every verse have a metaphor. One has to understand what one is reading. By now the reader of the *Seven Keys* has a clearer idea of what it is to see the *Bible through Eastern eyes*.

PART TWO

The Commentary

Chapters 8–10

CHAPTER 8

The Seven Keys Old Testament

In this chapter, and also in the two chapters that follow, I will explain various scriptural passages using the Seven Keys. This chapter works the keys with the Tanakh (Old Testament). Chapter Nine applies the keys to the New Testament. Chapter Ten works with passages in both Testaments. With some biblical verses I use only one or two keys, while in other passages I may have to employ more than two keys to unlock a scriptural quotation.

THE NAMES OF GOD

Our English word "God" derives from the German language. Its implied meaning is "the good." However, in the three major Semitic languages, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic—the term "God" has a deeper meaning than simply "the good."

"God" in Aramaic is *alaha*; in Hebrew it is *elohim*; in Arabic it is *allah*. All three words come from the Semitic root *el* or *'el*, and mean "to aid," "to help," "to defend," "to sustain," and "to succor."

In biblical languages the name of God also has various subordinate applications that express the idea of might, power, and strength. The people thought of God as All Might, All Power, All Strength. Easterners understand God as the very essence of all life and as the great Provider.

Variations of God's name in Hebrew Scripture came by revelation. According to the Bible, patriarchs and prophets had mystical encounters with the Presence we call "God." It was

from these men of vision and from their personal, subjective realizations that the different names of God came into Scripture. (According to the Koran, God has ninety-nine excellent names.) Again, dreams and visions were the means by which these excellent names became known.

Of all the names of God, the one that usually holds the greatest interest and fascination for most Bible readers is the "*I AM*." Moses received this name when he was on Mount Sinai. "And God said unto Moses, *I am that I am*: And he said, thus shall you say to the children of Israel, *I am* hath sent me to you."¹

The Aramaic text reads: "And God [*alaha*] said to Moses, *aheeyah ashara heeyah*. And he said, thus shall you tell the sons of Israel, *aheeyah* has sent me to you."² Both texts (Aramaic and Hebrew) in their original Semitic forms are identical.

Most Bible translators admit that it is very difficult to translate the terms *ehyeh* (Hebrew), *aheeyah* (Aramaic). Semitic linguists believe that the name comes from the Hebrew verb *hayah* — "to be." Dr. Lamsa translates the word as "the Living One (God)."³ This Semitic term implies something which exists by itself, an Essence which was, is, and is to come. *Aheeyah* simply *is* and is ever constant. God-realization is truly transmental and transphenomenal and is therefore indescribable.

Another name for God is the Aramaic word *ithea*. This word signifies "it" or "essence," the very origin of a thing. Interestingly, in Western Aramaic, the term *ithea* became *itheo*. Later the Greeks borrowed the word, changing it to *Theos*. We may therefore refer to God as "It." This is in accord with

¹Ex. 3:14, KJV.

²Ex. 3:14, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

³George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light*, pp. 105–106.

Semitic thought, because "it" implies the very essence and substance of life. In English translations of the Bible we render all the varying Semitic terms such as *alaha*, *aheeyah*, *ithea*, *elohim* and many other names in one way only — "God."

Although I have presented a semi-academic explanation of the various names of God, to an Easterner the whole matter goes deeper still. When a Semite refers to God, he prefers that you *feel*, rather than just intellectualize, his meaning. In other words, the name of God is open for analysis, but a more genuine understanding can only come by intuition from the soul of a human being. It is impossible for a Semite to try to press the meaning of God, Who is life itself, into a uniform dogma or rigid mode for the logical mind.⁴

According to the Bible, patriarchs and holy men knew God as a living presence. It is from the patriarchs' subjectively charged experiences that certain names of God came into special usage. As an example: "And it happened when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord [*yahweh*) came in a revelation to Abram and said to him, I am *alshadai* God [*alaha*].⁵ The Semitic name *alshadai* in Aramaic and Hebrew is difficult to translate. It is usually translated as "The Almighty." The term can also mean "self-sufficient one," "sustainer," "nourisher," "omnipotent," and "sovereign." Others translate this word as "mountain god" or the "breasted one."⁶

Whatever the meaning of this ancient appellation, when God communed with Abraham through this name, the patriarch came to a greater realization of his God. Men of God came to many awakenings through the spiritual indwelling and all-

⁴For a deeper discussion of the names of God and what God is, see my book *The Mysteries of Creation, The Genesis Story*, "The Primeval Mystery," pp. 49–68.

⁵Gen. 17:1, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁶See my book *The Mysteries of Creation, The Genesis Story*, "El Shaddai," p. 65 and footnotes 34–35.

encompassing presence of their God.

GOD IS ONE

And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.⁷

To whom was God addressing the "us" and the "our"? Hebrew writers tell us that God is one. This belief in the oneness of God has preserved Judaism and unified the Jewish people against much opposition and persecution over the centuries. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One."⁸

Many Bible interpreters held for a very long time that Genesis, Chapter One, refers to God's majesty and power, and denotes a "majestic plural." Today most commentators have abandoned this explanation entirely. Others (mostly Christian expositors) suggest that this verse implies the doctrine of the Trinity.⁹ Then again, some theologians believe that God addressed the angels. God addressed no one. According to ancient Near Eastern myths, the gods had a special meeting and

⁷Gen. 1:26, KJV.

⁸Deut. 6:4, KJV.

⁹The Nicean Council in 325 C.E. introduced the doctrine of the Trinity. Before that time both Jews and Christians believed and worshiped the one God only; neither the prophets, Jesus, nor his apostles had ever hinted that there was more than one God. A concept of the plurality of God was alien and repulsive to the Jewish authorities and, therefore, they denied such an idea. Interestingly, the ancient Aramaic-speaking Church of the East (Assyrians), maintains that there is only one God revealed in three *kenomaye* — attributes or manifestations. These three *kenomaye* are known as Mind, Wisdom/Love, and Life (Consciousness) — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

made the decision to create humankind. The biblical episode also says that God made a decision to create humankind. The key that unlocks the difficulty in this passage is the Semitic grammatical construction "let us." This, in Semitic languages, is a "plural of deliberation."¹⁰

CHERUBIM

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.¹¹

There were two deterrents created to prevent the man and the woman from returning to the Garden of Eden. One was the "flaming sword which turned every way"¹² and the other was the "Cherubim." In Hebrew the word is *k'robim* and in Aramaic *k'robey*. Scholars believe that the name seems to be linked with the *kuribu*, an Akkadian term used to describe the composite figures (man-headed bulls with eagles' wings) that often stood outside Beth-Naharain temples.¹³

¹⁰See *The Mysteries of Creation, The Genesis Story*, "Plural of Deliberation," pp. 118-19 and footnotes 3, 4.

¹¹Gen. 3:24, KJV.

¹²The Cherubim did not wield the flaming sword. It was a restraint separate from the Cherubim.

¹³"The name seems to derive from Akkadian *karabu*, 'to pronounce formulas of blessings, to pray.' The *kuribu* was an advocate for the faithful before the god and an advisor to the great gods, but it also guarded the entrance to the temple. The motif of the composite human-animal-bird figure is widespread in various forms of art and religious symbolism throughout the Fertile Crescent, and the biblical cherubim would seem to be connected with this artistic tradition. . . . Purely products of the human imagination, they do not represent any existing reality in heaven and earth." Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, p. 375.

K'robim or *k'robey* were guardians. Their function here was to protect the Garden of Eden and guard the Tree of Life. However, it is evident from the study of many verses in which the Cherubim appear that they performed various duties. Eastern kings had images of Cherubim placed on their thrones as symbols of protection.

In biblical days it was customary for a king to place men-servants with swords at the entrance of his sacred garden to keep people away. As one can readily see, this Eastern custom is carried out symbolically in the Garden of Eden narrative. Both the "Cherubim" and "flaming sword" represent God's counsel guarding the Tree of Life—immortality. God alone holds the secret of eternal life.

Moses made images of the cherubim and placed them over the Ark of the Covenant to protect it from thieves. He fashioned them upon the top of the ark to form "the Mercy Seat"—"God's invisible throne." God communed with Moses from the "Mercy Seat" above the ark, which was present in the tabernacle.¹⁴

Dr. Lamsa suggests that the Cherubim symbolize the moral law. He says: "The cherubim, the moral law, are a part of the human family and operates instinctively. It is the guardian and protector of the human race. Humankind cannot escape its genuine moral obligations if it is to survive."

THE LEGEND OF CAIN

The Torah relates the Cain narrative as:

. . . And in the course of time, it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of

¹⁴See Ex. 25:17-22.

the fatling thereof. And the Lord was pleased with Abel and with his offering; but with Cain and with his offering, he was not pleased. So Cain was exceedingly displeased, and his countenance was sad. . . .And Cain said to Abel his brother, Let us go to the plain; and it came to pass. . . . Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. . . . And the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel your brother? And he said, I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? . . . What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground. . . . And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, so that anyone who may find him may not kill him.¹⁵

Why did God choose Abel's offering and reject Cain's fruit of the ground? Since Adam and Eve were the first couple, of whom was Cain afraid? What is the meaning behind this story?

This short account belongs to a typical genre of Near Eastern legends. We must not understand it as a historical event, but as one of the many master scriptural texts that deal with desire, envy, rivalry, and violence. The narrative serves as a founding event in the sacred traditions of ancient Israel. Victimization, its process, and fratricide are the penetrating religious themes.

As of this writing, no direct parallel to Genesis 4:2-16 has been discovered. However, this does not mean that there were no other legends similar to the Israelite account. There is an old Persian tale about three brothers who go their way in the world. The father of the three boys favors the youngest and it arouses envy in the older two. Eventually, the older brothers murder their younger brother. Egyptian and Phoenician myths also tell two-brother tales. The biblical text differs in that it takes the side of the victim.

This tale is a short epic that describes the beginning of

¹⁵Gen. 4:2-16, Aramaic Peshitta text, Lamsa translation.

civilization. It is an ancient religious commentary about a basic human condition and problem—violence. "Now it happened after many days that Cain brought, from the fruit of the soil, a gift to *Yahweh* [*mariyah*]. And as for Abel [*havel*], he too brought from the firstborn ones of his flock, from the fattest of them. And *Yahweh* was delighted with Abel and his gift; but with Cain and his gift he was not delighted. So Cain was exceedingly displeased and his appearance was dismal."¹⁶

According to the text, *Yahweh* (the Lord) favors Abel's gift. Why would the Lord reject one and receive the other? The *Torah* writer does not tell the reason behind God's choice.

Biblical interpreters have guessed for centuries the reasons for God's rejection of Cain's gift. No one really knows. Evidently, before this story became a part of the book of Genesis, it contained more details. Nonetheless, the *Torah* scribe purposely condensed the narrative.

What we are to learn from this part of the tale is this: The writer has God playing a role. *Yahweh* may or may not be justified in choosing one gift over the other. The point is that the choice aroused envy, rivalry, and a sense of rejection in Cain. An inequality interrupted Cain's life. Now Cain has a choice. How will he respond to it? Will he want to remove his brother through a violent act? Or, will he find another way?

As humans, we often face inequality in our lives and have to make choices. Will we become resentful, act violently, or discover something powerful in ourselves that rises above envy, rivalry, and retaliation? We know what happened to Cain — the seeming story of civilization. Let us read on.

"And Cain said to *Yahweh*: My offense is too great to be forgiven. Behold, You have driven me out this day from the face of the soil; and from Your presence shall I be hidden; and I will be moving and wandering here and there over the earth;

¹⁶Gen. 4:3–5, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

now it will happen that anyone who may find me shall kill me; . . . and *Yahweh* set a mark (sign) upon Cain so that anyone who may find him may not slay him."¹⁷

Of whom was Cain afraid? And, where did Cain find a wife? People usually ask these two questions. We must always keep in mind that this narrative is a primeval event. It is a historical sacred lesson, not a historic fact. It is a lesson against violence and blood-avengers. The *Torah* writer is not describing two historic personages named Cain and Abel. To ask the two above questions is to miss the point of the tale.

THE MARK OF CAIN

Until recent days, law officials in Semitic lands branded assassins as one would brand cattle. This mark bore witness that the criminal received his just punishment for his crime. Even today, in many Moslem countries, robbers and criminals receive punishment for their crimes by having their noses, legs, hands, or arms cut off.

In the biblical narrative, Cain knew he was to leave the land of Eden. He was to become a wanderer. Since he was doomed as a vagabond, he wanted protection. In the East when a man flees his country and takes refuge among a foreign people, everyone wants to know why. People are suspicious of any individual who leaves his kinsmen, traditions, and religions. They believe him to be an outlaw and do not welcome him. Cain wanted assurance from God that strangers would not put him to death.

Cain was exiled from the land of Eden, and the mark was the evidence (sign) that he had received his punishment. In the ancient world exile was the same as a death sentence.

¹⁷Gen. 4:13-14, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

God assured Cain that anyone who would slay him would encounter a sevenfold punishment. "Seven" is a holy number, and the author depicted God using "seven" because Easterners could relate to its significance in the story of Cain.

BIRTH CONTROL

And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also.¹⁸

From the very beginning, Semitic people maintained that the continuity of life was in posterity. They also believed that when a man died without a son he lost his immortality. Therefore, in an Eastern family when one of the married brothers died without a successor, custom dictated that another brother must marry his widowed sister-in-law. He must raise an heir for the deceased.

Onan was unwilling to raise a heir for his brother who had died. He knew the heir would eventually become a rival to him, as generally happens in the East. This is the reason Onan practiced this form of birth control.

Today we know that the continuance of life is not in one's descendants but in the survival of the race. Thousands of men have sacrificed their lives for their faith, people, and country, leaving no heirs. Martyrs and saints also had surrendered to death so that others might live. Surely these individuals are not cut off from the "tree of life" just because they left no offspring or descendants. We realize that not all

¹⁸Gen. 38:8-10, KJV.

branches in a tree produce fruit, but all the branches share in the nourishing of the fruits. So it is with the human family.

Since the Hebrews attributed everything to God, they believed that their God slew Onan for his disobedience. Typically, Easterners interpreted Onan's death as God's displeasure and punishment for his refusal to raise an heir for his brother.

AND GOD REMEMBERED

And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them.¹⁹

In the last phrase of verse 25, the King James Version says: "And God had respect unto them." However, the Aramaic and Hebrew texts differ from this rendering of the passage. They literally read: "And God saw the sons of Israel, and God *knew*."

The Semitic term *ydaa* means "to know," "to notice," "to recognize," "to perceive directly," and "to apprehend immediately by the senses or by the mind." God heard Israel's cries of oppression and He remembered the agreement He had made with their ancestors. The writer informs us that God looked upon Israel and immediately apprehended the dire situation.

"And God remembered" is a significant and meaningful expression to Easterners. It strikes a deep tender response in their hearts. "The remembrance," as they say in the Near East, is important in the daily lives of the people and in their literature. It underscores the most sensitive spirit of their poetry.

¹⁹Ex. 2:24-25, KJV.

Such phrases as "and I remember," "remember me," "your remembrance," and "the remembrance of those days" are just a few of the many similar expressions that Semites use. Throughout the Bible the saying "and God remembered" appears repeatedly. We need not understand this expression literally. The saying is poetic. God does not remember or forget. This is a stylized form of Eastern writing.²⁰

It was the author of the book of Exodus who emphasized the idea that God had not forgotten his people Israel while they were in Egypt. God had been with Israel always. He had raised Joseph to a high position, second only to that of the King.

Yahweh had increased their numbers abundantly, blessed their flocks, and multiplied their wealth. Now it was time for Israel to remember the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel had a spiritual mission; they were to carry the light of God.

According to the book of Genesis, from the beginning, God called their ancestors from Chaldea to dwell in Palestine. The covenant that God made with the patriarchs must find fulfillment. The only way to carry out the promises was to bring Israel back to the land where their fathers had lived and died. At that time the Israelites detested city living, civil ordinances, and forced labor. They were ready to return to Palestine.

GOD REPENTS

Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel, saying, it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be King: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto

²⁰See Gen. 8:1, 19:29, and 30:22.

the Lord all night.²¹

Eastern writers usually describe God as a human being, a male deity. They often portray Him as wearing garments, having a beard, standing in the clouds, and riding them like chariots. At times they even ascribe to Him human emotions, such as feeling sorry or happy. All these attributes are replicas of a human being's characteristics. Jesus said: "God is Spirit." Spirit is intangible and noncorporeal. Scripture clearly says that no one has ever seen God.²² And, because no one has ever seen God, Eastern scribes portray God in physical form, giving Him human emotions.

Actually, it was Samuel who regretted having made Saul the King of Israel. Samuel sought vengeance against the Amalekites because they had harassed his people centuries ago.²³ In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses left orders that Israel should always remember what Amalek did to them when they fled Egypt. He reminded them in detail how Amalek met them with the sword and killed all those who were left behind. He destroyed them when they were faint and weary from traveling through the desert. Amalek was an enemy never to be forgotten.²⁴

Samuel had given strict orders to Saul to slay every Amalekite. Saul disobeyed those orders. As readers of the Bible, we must always keep in mind that Samuel lived in a time when the law of the land was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Naturally, what the Amalekites had done to Israel, the Hebrews had to do to the Amalekites. Such was the logic of that particular era.

²¹1 Sam. 15:10-11, KJV.

²²See Jn. 1:18.

²³See Ex. 17:8-14.

²⁴See Deut. 25:17-19.

God does not repent; and neither does He regret. Again, Eastern biblical writers often depicted God as a human being, regretting, repenting, and even changing His mind.

PAYING HOMAGE TO A PRINCE

And Jonathan gave his artillery unto his lad, and said unto him, Go, carry them to the city. And as soon as the lad was gone, David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times: and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded.²⁵

In complying with Eastern custom, government officials and noblemen bowed to the ground when greeting a royal prince or king. At times they would also kiss the shoes, knees, and hand of the monarch. This custom still prevails in these Eastern lands which continue the ancient practices and where kings still rule.

In those days kings and princes were looked upon as deities. The people often worshiped their king. When David saw Jonathan, he fell with his face to the ground and made obeisance. After all, Jonathan was the crown prince and heir to the throne of Israel.

Kissing among Eastern men was a common convention, a custom that is still fondly cherished and respectfully practiced. For instance, Eastern men who are friends and are of the same social status usually kiss one another on both cheeks and sometimes quite noisily.

David was Johnathan's brother-in-law. They knew that they would not see each other ever again. Therefore, it was only natural they that would weep and kiss in typical Near

²⁵1 Sam. 20:40-41, KJV.

Eastern affection and fashion. Interestingly, the Aramaic text says that David wept more than Jonathan.

A WILLINGNESS TO LOSE ONE'S LIFE

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.²⁶

David, mourning over Jonathan, his brother-in-law, poured out his soul in song. Jonathan had saved David's life from his father, King Saul. His love for David was so great that he had risked his father's anger, and possibly exile or death. Saul was very bitter toward his son because he knew that Jonathan had helped David. The king rebuked his son on many occasions.

In Aramaic, the word "love" means a warm, caring, and spiritual love. Writers do not use this word to refer to sexual relationship. They use it in Scripture to refer to loving your enemies, loving your ruler, country, and loving God.

In the Near East, men address one another as "my beloved." The apostle Paul uses these terms in his epistles. Jesus also said: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another."²⁷ Pure love is the cohesive force that binds humanity together.

The phrase: "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" means that Jonathan's love was incomparable. David refers to spiritual love. Jonathan was willing to die for the sake of his brother-in-law. Again, Jesus said: "There is not greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for the sake

²⁶2 Sam. 1:26, KJV.

²⁷Jn. 13:34, KJV.

of his friends."²⁸

THE BEARD AND DISGRACE

Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one-half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away.²⁹

It is very difficult to convey to Western people how Easterners feel about their beards. It was a very ancient sacred belief of the Hebrews that a man's strength was in his hair. They believed the hair contained life. Samson believed that his strength was in his hair. It served as a reminder of the divine promises which God had revealed to Samson's mother and father.

Samson followed the Nazarite vow. No razor was to touch his head. Among Semites, if anyone should make an unkind or unwise remark about another's mustache, beard, or even dare to curse the beard of another man's father, that one would be in deep trouble. He could lose his life over such remarks.

Eastern men love to swear on their beards. There is a great deal of body language with their beards. For instance, if an Easterner strokes his beard while you are speaking, this means he does not believe what you are saying. If he should hold his beard while you speak or teach, that means he trusts in what you say.

The town officials will shave half the beard of a disgraced nobleman or a defrocked priest. They will also shave the hair of women who have committed acts of immorality. The women will also tear their garments as a sign of mourning over

²⁸Jn. 15:13, KJV.

²⁹2 Sam. 10:4, KJV.

the deed they have done. Anyone looking at these men and women know they have received their punishment because of the half shaved beard or the shaved head (short hair).³⁰

Semites consider the beard so highly that at times they will swear by the beards of a prophet, saint, or king. Some Moslems believe that a few hairs from the beard of their holy prophet Muhammad were preserved. Such holy relics are priceless. Pilgrims come from all over the world to visit holy places containing such relics.

The Ammonite king was suspicious of David's sympathies for the passing of his father. It was not uncommon for enemies of a certain kingdom to take advantage of such an opportunity to spy within the city. When mourning a king, princes and noblemen are absorbed in lamenting the deceased; therefore the spies who are pretending to mourn are generally free to roam throughout the city.

During these times spies study the town's fortifications, its entrances and exits. The town usually keeps such defenses secret. They also keep the sources of water and wells hidden so that the town's water supply would not be cut off during a siege. If the enemy disconnects their water sources, the city would have to surrender.

David wanted to avenge his honor when he heard that the King of Ammon had disgraced his ambassadors. He commanded his men to stay at Jericho until their beards grew out again. In Eastern countries a man's beard is a symbol of his dignity, honor, virility, and maturity. If the ambassadors had returned to Jerusalem with half-shaven beards, they would have become a laughingstock.

³⁰See 1 Cor. 11:5.

THE LORD STRUCK THE CHILD

And Nathan departed unto his house. And the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick.³¹

In biblical days, people thought that health, death, sicknesses, and misfortunes were acts of God. When people did something wrong and misfortune would come to them, they believed that God brought the calamity as punishment. Again, when others prospered, they thought that God brought wealth to them. They concluded that nothing happens without God's knowledge and approval.

In those days religion was in its infancy. The knowledge of God was limited to a few people. Men did not realize that most of the events that happened to them were manifestations of their own actions.

God does not discriminate among his children. It is humankind who attributes discrimination to God. For instance, the Bible says that *Yahweh* struck the first child of David and Bathsheba with sickness. But then *Yahweh* does the opposite and loves their second child, even nicknaming him.³² This was the belief of the people in those days. Jesus taught that God is love. And, we know that *love* does not author sickness or disease.

POLYGAMY

But King Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the

³¹2 Sam. 12:15, KJV.

³²See 2 Sam. 12:24-25.

nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in unto them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart.³³

From time immemorial, polygamy has been prevalent in the Near East, Middle East, and many other countries. Constant wars caused an imbalance between the male and female populations. Men practiced polygamy, not only to replenish the population, but for economic and political reasons also. These marriages were a part of the alliances made in those days. Therefore Solomon married seven hundred women, forming alliances with kings, princes, and other powerful leaders.

Another example is the King of Tyre, who made an alliance with King Ahab by giving him his daughter Jezebel in marriage. Pharaoh also made alliances with King Solomon. Marriage sealed the agreement. King Solomon became the son-in-law of all the rulers with whom he made treaties. This was the reason there was peace during his reign.

Nevertheless, Solomon's marriages with foreign women were contrary to the laws of Moses. These wives of Solomon stole his heart and led him to worship their gods. They contributed to the downfall of his kingdom.

Solomon had acquired considerable wisdom and experience in settling quarrels among his wives. The proof of this is in the story of Solomon's clever judgment when two women sought justice from his hands.³⁴

³³1 Ki. 11:1-3, KJV.

³⁴See 1 Ki. 3:16-28.

THE MANTLE

So he departed thence, and found Elisha, the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee? And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.³⁵

Apparently, Elijah was growing old and needed a successor. His battles with the prophet of Baal and with the king and queen of Israel had sapped his strength. Furthermore, the cunning queen, Jezebel, continually sought to take his life.

When the prophet was returning home from Mount Horeb, he passed through a large field where there were twelve plows. Elisha was one of the plowers. The moment Elijah saw Elisha, the spirit of the Lord—that is, an inner voice told him that Elisha was his successor. Then he suddenly took off his mantle and threw it over Elisha. This act signified that Elisha was to inherit the prophetic office of Elijah. Now the battles of Elijah were to become the battles of Elisha.

People feared and respected the prophets more than they did their kings. Elisha was overjoyed at the prospect of becoming a prophet. He accepted his call by immediately sacrificing the oxen, boiling the meat, and giving it to the people as a thanks offering.

Elisha's ready acceptance of the prophetic calling surprised Elijah. For a few moments he thought that Elisha

³⁵1 Ki. 19:19-21, KJV.

might change his mind, so he tested him out. He said to Elisha: "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" But Elisha showed his determination by following the prophet. He served Elijah faithfully and studied with him until the day he wore his master's mantle permanently.

POETIC METAPHORS

For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.³⁶

Isaiah refers to the remnant of Israel. This remnant was to return peacefully to their homeland, and not like their ancestors who left Egypt in the midst of fear. Gentile nations, among whom the remnant of Israel was dwelling, would offer them help and, according to the prophet, nature would also share in Israel's glorious return. The trees would be glad and clap their hands. In other words, Israel was to receive praise.

"Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree" means that instead of difficulties, Israel will have blessings and harmony. "Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree" signifies that other nations will no longer harass Israel. Other communities will receive Israel openly, and the Israelites will have great joy. The Gentiles will praise God's name for his faithfulness in returning the Jews.

Isaiah uses poetic, figurative speech. Eastern people understand this clearly and do not take it literally. They know that trees and fields clapping their hands, and the hills and

³⁶Isa. 55:12-13, KJV.

mountains singing, mean that nature shares in the joys of the human family.

CONCLUSION

As one can easily see, the Bible is more clearly understood when one is familiar with the Seven Keys that help unlock the holy text. The preceding commentaries are only a few passages of the Hebrew Scripture. There is much more to know and discern. But now we are ready to begin our look at the New Testament in the light of the Seven Keys.

CHAPTER 9

The Seven Keys New Testament

HEAVEN

Where and what is heaven? Is heaven a place for the life hereafter? Again, we turn to the Aramaic language for clarification. *Shmaya* is the Aramaic term for "heaven." This compound noun derives its meaning from *shem*, "name," and *yah*, "Yahweh." Thus, the word "heaven" from its root means "the name of God [*Yah*]."

Ancient sages and prophets poetically and metaphorically tell us that God inhabits the heavens. They also inform us that the heavens declare God's glory and wondrous works. The biblical psalmist says: "The heavens sing the songs of God; and the firmament reveals the works of His hand."¹

Near Eastern myths teach us that the gods lived in high places and dwelled in the heavens. People built shrines and temples on high hills and mountains, because they believed contact with the gods would be easier in elevated places than in the lowlands.² Nonetheless, many Hebrew prophets, and Jesus, understood that God is everywhere. Jesus taught us: "When you pray, pray in this manner, Our Father who is in heaven." "Heaven" here means "universe" or by implication "everywhere." Jesus also said that God is Spirit—that is, everywhere.

When Paul stood before the men of Athens in the court at Areopagus, he said: "For the God who made the world and

¹Ps. 19:1, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

²Some biblical poets and writers tell us that the clouds were God's chariots.

all things therein, and who is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; . . . *For in Him we live and move and have our being, as some of your own wise men have said, for we are His kindred.*"³ Paul's saying is truly the key to understanding the meaning of "heaven."

Bible authors used the term "heaven" metaphorically to express the idea of peace, order, and harmony. Ancient savants, in studying the heavens, observed the order and harmony of the planets. Through their teachings, the prophets attempted to show that humankind could also function as did the heavenly bodies. The human family was capable of harmonious actions and orderly conduct for the benefit of all.

When living in times of peace, prosperity, and tranquility, Easterners often say: "We are in heaven." Figuratively, "heaven" also means a greater consciousness where thoughts of lack and fear disappear. One can readily see that the term "heaven" also implies a state of being, and not just a specified location.

Geographically speaking, we are in heaven now. The planet earth is present in a vast cosmos. In reality, there isn't a person anywhere who can honestly tell us exactly where the earth is. We are somewhere in a tremendous universe of galaxies that has no starting point from which to measure. Scientist have many theories, but we still do not know with any certainty how we began. And for that matter, we do not know how (or if) the earth will end. All we know is that we are somewhere in space.⁴

Jesus often referred to the "kingdom of heaven" in his talks. He explained this kingdom through parables. The special "state of heaven" is a universal kingdom in which Jesus, as the Messiah, rules through his teachings and commandments. His

³Acts 17:24-28, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁴See Errico, *The Mysteries of Creation, the Genesis Story*, "Where Are We?" pp. 42-44.

universal reign, once operative, would eventually embrace people of all races, colors and all religions. In other words, there would be peace and harmony — therefore, "heaven" here on earth.

Problems and challenges would be settled without wars and strife in the messianic kingdom. Love would reign supreme in the transformed hearts and minds of nations. Thus the term "kingdom of heaven" also suggests the supremacy of love among humankind.

LIGHT

Noohra is the Aramaic word for "light," "enlightenment," and "understanding." In many passages of the Bible, the term "light" symbolically represents God's word. It also means a "true teaching." This is why the psalmist says: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."⁵

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, by a reference to light, the author gives a scientific insight into creation. It says: "Then God exclaimed: Let there be light! And there was light. Now God saw the light that it was beautiful."⁶ Light was the first act of creation.

Modern cosmology has established that the primeval fireball was the beginning of the universe. This fireball suddenly appeared. All existing matter and energy are a direct result of the appearance of "light," i.e., the primeval fireball.⁷

⁵Ps. 119:105, KJV.

⁶Gen. 1:3, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁷Errico, *The Mysteries of Creation, The Genesis Story*, "Modern Science," p. 93.

The ancient writer believed, as we do today, that everything comes from light. Modern physicists tell us that matter is nothing more than gravitationally trapped light or energy. And, that very light is the source of humankind's physical existence on earth.

Jesus referred to himself as "the light of the world," an expression which signified that his teaching was like the great luminary of the world, the sun. And even as the sun pours out life and light upon our planet, so does Jesus' teaching "pour out" life and enlightenment to people everywhere. Jesus' saying "I am the light of the world" may paraphrase as: "my teaching enlightens the world of humanity." We as human beings see clearly when light is present; and where there is light, we need not falter.

Another powerful declaration that Jesus spoke is: "You are the light of the world." We have a responsibility to let love, justice, compassion, and goodness shine as a way of life to illumine the world around us. The light of God's truth always shines in every century and in all generations. It reveals a happier, healthier way of living for the entire human family. Again the man from Galilee said: "He who follows my teaching shall not walk in darkness [ignorance], but shall find for himself the light of life."⁸

THE NAME OF JESUS

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth. . . . And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name

⁸Jn. 8:12, Aramaic Peshitta text, Erricc translation.

Jesus.⁹

Yeshoa or *Yeshua* is the Northern Galilean Aramaic form of Jesus' name. This name was a common and popular one in biblical lands in the first century. Our English form of Jesus' name comes from a shortened classical Hebrew/Aramaic form of *Yeshua*. However, the name *Yeshua* is, in turn, a shortened form of the famous biblical hero's name "Joshua," son of Nun.

The name "Jesus" means "Yahweh saves," "Savior," "deliverer." Scholars suggest that the name "Jesus" originally and more precisely means "Yahweh helps." *Yehoshua* is the full Hebrew form of the name. In Scripture the name appears in the shortened form *Yeshua*. "Joshua" was the name commonly used before the Babylonian exile. Among the Jews, after the Chaldean (Babylonian) exile, the short form of the name — *Yeshua* — was adopted.

Despite the change, the name "Joshua" did not die out entirely. The name "Jesus" remained popular among the Jews until the beginning of the second century C.E. The Jews then stopped using "Jesus" as a personal name and revived the classical term "Joshua." Therefore, from the second century onward "Jesus" became a rare name among Jewish people.

According to New Testament writers, Jesus fulfilled many messianic prophecies. This is the reason Mary and Joseph received instructions to name their baby boy *Yeshua*, "Yahweh saves," or "Savior." His mission was to save his people from their sins (errors).

"Then she will give birth to a son, and you shall name him Jesus, indeed, he shall bring his people back to life from their sins."¹⁰ Interestingly, the word "sin"—*ḥata* in Aramaic—means "to miss the mark." And, the word "save," *haiway*, means "to revive," "to restore," "to give life," and "to resuscitate."

⁹Lk. 1:26, 30-31, KJV.

¹⁰Mt. 1:21, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

Jesus, through his life and teachings, was to revive and restore spiritual vitality to his people. They were "missing the mark" and had lost their way. He was the hope not only for his own nation, but for all nations. This is why the angels sang at his birth: "Song and Praise be to God in the highest, and throughout the earth peace and good hope for the human family."¹¹

"Christ" is a title, not a proper name. It comes from the Greek word *Christos*, which, in turn, comes from the Aramaic language. In Aramaic *m'sheeha*, "messiah" has three meanings: "the anointed," "the ordained," and "the consecrated." It may also mean "the appointed," "one who carries the light of God." According to Hebrew Scripture, kings, priests, and sometimes prophets received the anointing oil when taking on their respective offices.

What is most interesting is that the biblical kings also had the title of *m'sheeha* — "messiah" or "christ." This meant that they were anointed ones or christed ones. Anointing with consecrated oil, applied to the crown of the head like an ointment, is a very ancient rite. In Hebrew the word "anoint" is *mashach*, therefore the title "messiah" (anointed one).

The act of anointing is a transfer of divine powers to the person who receives the special anointing. Thus, one became known as the "Lord's anointed," In other words, the anointed one became a son of *Yahweh* (the Lord) by adoption (that is, through the act of anointing). David called King Saul, "the Lord's anointed," or "Yahweh's anointed," a christ of God.

Jesus was the Anointed or the Christ because his ordination was from God. No organization or special religious group anointed Jesus of Nazareth. God appointed him; that is, life itself had ordained Jesus to carry out a unique mission for humankind.

¹¹Lk. 2:14, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

THE ONLY-BEGOTTEN

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.¹²

What did the writer of John's gospel mean by the expression "only-begotten?" Biblical authors often express spiritual ideas and truths in figurative speech and human terms. Therefore we can easily misunderstand the writer's meaning and intention.

According to Semitic thinking, God is Spirit. And God never begets, nor is He begotten. He is not subject to conditions of time, space, or birth. Nonetheless, Easterners speak of God in poetic and metaphoric terms. They often describe Him as having ears, hands, eyes, and even wings.

In Aramaic *yeheedaya*, does not mean "only-begotten." It means "sole," "only," "precious," "beloved," and "one of a kind." This word also, by implication, refers to the "firstborn son."

People who speak Aramaic understand this expression literally when referring to their children, especially when distinguishing between the firstborn son and his father. But when they refer to God in this expression, they understand it figuratively. We must also discern the Eastern custom that is behind the meaning of *yeheedaya*.

Interestingly the term *monogenes* in the Greek New Testament does not mean "only-begotten." Then how did we come to use the English term "only-begotten" for both the Aramaic and Greek terms? A Roman Catholic New Testament scholar clarifies this part of history for us:

Literally the Greek means "of a single [*monos*] kind

¹²Jn. 1:14, KJV.

[*genos*]." Although *genos* is distantly related to *gennan*, "to beget," there is little Greek justification for the translation of *monogenes* as "only begotten." The Old Latin version correctly translated it as *unicus*, "only" and so did Jerome where it was not applied to Jesus. But to answer the Arian claim that Jesus was not begotten but made, Jerome translated it as *unigenitus*, "only begotten," in passages like this one (also Jn. 1:18, 3:16, and 18). The influence of the Vulgate on the King James made "only begotten" the standard English rendition. (Actually, as we have insisted, John does not use the term "begotten" of Jesus.) *Monogenes* describes a quality of Jesus, his uniqueness, not what is called in Trinitarian theology his "procession." It reflects Hebrew *yahid*, "only," "precious," which is used in Gen. 22:2, 12, 16, of Abraham's son Isaac, as *monogenes* is used of Isaac in Hebrews 11:17. Isaac was Abraham's uniquely precious son, but not his only begotten.¹³

In the Near East, the firstborn son is the *yeheedayā*, "the sole heir" of all the father possesses. This "beloved son" is the glory and honor of his father. He is the one who will succeed his father, carry his name, and inherit his business. He will also be in charge of all his father's household and will give orders to his father's wife or wives.

John uses this term *yeheedayā* to mean that Jesus expressed a unique and beloved relationship with God as a father. Jesus' life was a vital and powerful manifestation of divine sonship. Therefore, he became known as the "sole heir" and "uniquely beloved son" of this universal and spiritual truth of divine sonship for the human family.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that Jesus is "the firstborn among many brethren."¹⁴ According to the New

¹³Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, "Notes" and "only Son," pp. 13-14.

¹⁴See Rom. 8:29.

Testament, we come to understand that we and all nationalities are children of God through the teachings of the Messiah. Jesus constantly showed his sonship by his good works, various kinds of healing, and his inexplicable resurrection from the dead. "And who came to be known as the Son of God with power and with the Holy Spirit, because he arose from the dead, and he is Jesus the Messiah our Lord."¹⁵

As an *yeheedaya*, "only son," brings joy to the hearts of his parents and glorifies them, so does Jesus, through his life and teaching, bring joy to us all. Humankind had lost this idea of spiritual sonship. Jesus reinstates and re-enforces our awareness that we (the human family) are the image and likeness of God.¹⁶

An Eastern father glories when he sees his "firstborn son," because he sees himself re-created in his offspring. This is what John is saying about God as a father: "the glory as of the only son of the Father." According to the author, it is only through Jesus' teaching that people learn of their divine sonship again.

"But those who received him, to them he gave power to become sons of God, especially to those who believed in his name."¹⁷ In this verse, the word "power," *shultana*, means "right," or "authority." The Aramaic phrase "believe in his name" signifies "to believe in his teaching." This idea is repeated in the epistle of John: "My beloved, *now* we are the children [sons] of God."¹⁸

¹⁵Rom. 1:4, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

¹⁶See Gen. 1:26-27.

¹⁷Jn. 1:12, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

¹⁸1 Jn. 3:2.

SYMBOLISM

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.¹⁹

"The heavens were opened" is an Aramaic way of saying the universe rejoiced at the presence of Jesus. It is the Messiah's teaching that removes the chasm in our minds that separates heaven and earth. This phrase also means that heaven (God) approved Jesus' mission.

Biblical scribes use the dove symbolically in their writings to represent meekness and purity. The dove was the first domesticated bird. When Noah sent the dove out of the ark, it returned to him with a blossomed twig from an olive tree. This symbolized peace, harmony, and tranquility. The flood had subsided and a peaceful era lay ahead.

In Near Eastern towns, the dove often makes its habitation with the community. It makes its nest in temples, church buildings, and houses. The dove, because of its purity and harmlessness, has won people's hearts, and therefore they never molest them.

Easterners often say: "He is so good and harmless even a dove will sit on him" when describing a pious and gentle person. They will also say: "He is so meek that a bird will not fly away from him." Jesus also instructed his disciples to be "harmless as doves." This means be pure, innocent, and sincere so that strangers will welcome you into their homes and receive your message.

Spirit has neither shape nor form, but Eastern scribes symbolized "Spirit" as a dove so that their readers might understand. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jesus as a pure,

¹⁹Mt. 3:16, KJV.

meek, and harmless bird—a dove. This means that God received Jesus and his mission. John saw the Spirit while in a moment of trance, exactly the way Ezekiel and other prophets had seen their visions of God and His habitation.

The dove was the sign of a new order of peace and enlightenment which would replace the old order of fear and war. Jesus was ready to embark on his new mission that would change the world and bring the nations to God. His visit to the river Jordan met with the divine approval of his heavenly Father.

CHILD OF HELL

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.²⁰

Terms of speech such as "child of hell" and "son of hell" are prevalent in biblical lands. One often hears an individual say to another: "You child of wickedness." This means, "Your actions are treacherous." *Bar-gayhenna*, "child of hell," means "a corrupt individual." He is so wicked that the only thing he is good for is for burning—that is, used as fuel. (Remember, this is a figure of speech.) According to Eastern custom, a tree that does not bear fruit is good for only one thing — to burn as fuel.

The Pharisees traveled over land and sea in search of converts. According to the gospels, Pharisees knew how to deceive people through their false piety, cheat widows, orphans, and exact tithes of even the smallest herbs (dill and cumin) planted in people's gardens. They did not teach the important matters of the law such as mercy, justice, and forgiveness. They

²⁰Mt. 23:15, KJV.

taught details that were burdensome. Thus, the converts learned things which were unnecessary. This corrupted them even more than before their conversion. They learned the unjust habits of their teachers and became more corrupt than their religious guides. This is the meaning of the phrase, "ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves."²¹

SATAN — A COMMON EXPRESSION

As readers of the Bible, one of our main challenges and difficulties is that we take everything we read in Scripture so literally. Let us consider a saying recorded in John's gospel. The traditional translation reads: "Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a *devil*?"²² The Eastern Aramaic text reads: "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet among you one is a *Satan*?"²³

Satana, "Satan," derives from the Aramaic root *sata*, and means "to slip," "to slide," "to deceive," "to miss the mark," and "to cause one to be misled or go astray." In Aramaic, calling an individual a "satan" means that the person is going astray or misleads. "Satan" is a Chaldean-Aramaic term. The first five books of the Bible rarely used it. Israel's prophets also hardly ever employed the expression "Satan." It gradually crept into Jewish literature during the exile and post-exilic period of Israel's history.

On another occasion Peter rebuked Jesus. The apostle tried to persuade his master not to speak about his coming

²¹Many modern New Testament scholars believe that the polemic against the Pharisee movement was added in the gospels by later Christian scribes after Jesus' death. They also propose that Jesus never verbally attacked the Scribes or Pharisees personally.

²²Jn. 6:70, KJV.

²³Jn. 6:20, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

crucifixion and death. Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter. He responded by calling his disciple a "satan." "Get behind me, satan; you are an offense to me because you are not thinking the things of God but things of people."²⁴

"Satan" here refers to Peter's misguided intention. Peter attempted to redirect Jesus' course. He didn't want his master to talk about the cross and dying. Peter's admonition was misleading to Jesus and would deter him from his destiny. Although Peter had honorable intentions, his rebuke to his master carried implications of which he was unaware. Nonetheless, the apostle thought, spoke, and believed like the masses concerning a conquering Messiah.

Everyone expected a powerful, worldly-wise, militant, Messiah-King. The Messiah would live forever and save them from Roman domination and oppression. All the apostles believed in a political Messiah and kingdom,²⁵ even after the resurrection.²⁶ Jesus returned Peter's rebuke and called him "satan."

Now in this passage of John's gospel (6:20) mentioned above, Jesus knew that among the twelve one was a "satan." Judas, of course, was the one to whom Jesus referred. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Judas was a believer in his master. But when he realized that the prophet from Nazareth was not the militant, political leader whom he and the people had anticipated, Judas attempted to dissociate himself from his teacher. Feeling disillusioned, Judas deserted the ranks of the apostles and betrayed his lord and leader.

However, when Jesus referred to Judas as "satan" in this passage, he meant simply that Judas would behave deceptively and insincerely. Such statements are common in Aramaic and

²⁴Mt. 16:23, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

²⁵See Mt. 20:20–21.

²⁶See Acts 1:6.

Arabic speech. One will often hear people say to one another: "*satana*" ("you satan"). In colloquial speech *satana* also means "an ingenious person," while in Arabic *shytan* means "a clever one." Thus, the terms from which our word "Satan" derives do not refer to any malevolent, supernatural being, but are everyday expressions that point to human behavior.

FIGURATIVE SPEECH

Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death. Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste death.²⁷

According to what the elders of Israel taught during the time of Jesus, death was the end. Abraham and the prophets had died and were in their graves. It was the people's belief in death that made it a terrible finality in their minds.

On another occasion, Jesus told his disciples and the people that God was the God of the living and not of the dead. "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?"²⁸ All Hebrew prophets and men of God were spiritually alive, but the people did not realize this truth. According to Jesus' teaching, men of good deeds were to live through their good works and would never be forgotten.

When the Jews referred to Jesus as having a "devil," it had a special meaning. "Devil" in this instance means "a wild man," "an insane man," "a mentally disturbed person." In simple

²⁷Jn. 8:51-52, KJV.

²⁸Mt. 22:31-32, KJV.

English, they said he was "crazy." The Jews acquired the use of the term "devil" during the exile in Babylon (Chaldea). In Aramaic the text reads: "The Jews said to him, Now we are sure that you are insane."

Near Easterners attribute all forms of insanity and mental disturbances to devils, demons, and jinns. Medical terms, as we use them today, were not known. And in many areas of the Near East, people still are not familiar with our medical terms. Psychological expressions for mental illness and emotional problems were alien to the Eastern mind.

They called Jesus a crazy person because those who heard him were shocked by his promise of not "tasting death." It sounded ridiculous to them. How could they believe that this peasant from Nazareth was greater than their ancestor Abraham, or even greater than the prophets?

LITTLE CHILDREN

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you.²⁹

Eastern teachers, when conveying their love and closeness to their disciples, will address them as "little children" in Aramaic. Ecclesiastical authorities, when addressing a letter to the members of their churches, will write: "My beloved children [sons]." One also hears people engaged in conversation calling each other "my father" or "my son." Elders usually address the younger ones as "my sons."

Interestingly, according to custom, people call or address unlearned men, no matter how old they are, as "little children." When God called Jeremiah to preach to the people, the

²⁹Jn. 13:33, KJV.

prophet said: "I am a child." This means "I am unlearned." In Arabic, people refer to such a person as *jahil*, "inexperienced."

PAUL TEACHES CRUCIFIXION

I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God for if righteousness comes by the law, then, Christ is dead in vain.³⁰

It is unnecessary to take the expression "I am crucified with Christ" literally. Many people interpret this verse to mean that the life of a true follower of Christ must be one of suffering and poverty. But this was not the intended meaning of the apostle.

What Paul means is: "I am sharing the same sufferings which Jesus endured on the cross, because I am living according to his way of life." People defamed, harassed, and persecuted Paul because of the gospel he proclaimed. Just as Jesus paid a price — his own life — for his teaching, so Paul did the same by exposing himself to many dangers and hardships while preaching Jesus' gospel.

The apostle understood the depth and meaning of the crucifixion. Therefore he could surrender his life completely to God and follow the teachings of his Christ. All worldly passions and aspirations weighed nothing in the balance, because Jesus the Messiah was all to him.

The life Paul was now living was totally directed and motivated by his new religion. This new faith was a fresh understanding that Jesus brought to Hebrew Scripture — a faith

³⁰Gal. 2:20-21, KJV.

that involved spiritual principles that were contrary to the principles of the world.

When the apostle says he does not "frustrate the grace of God," we must understand this phrase as a figure of speech. Paul knew that the works of the law could not fully express true piety. It is the grace (lovingkindness) of God that reveals genuine goodness and piety.

The law was to help and direct human beings in their daily community life. It was not to enslave or crush the human community. If anyone broke the laws of Moses, it brought condemnation and punishment, while the lovingkindness (grace) of God brings love and forgiveness. "Because the law was given by Moses; but truth and lovingkindness came by Jesus the Messiah."³¹

VICTORY OVER DEATH

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through
our Lord Jesus Christ.³²

The word "death" in Aramaic means "to be present elsewhere." It does not mean annihilation, nor does it mean to cease to exist. Death is not a finality.

Death is not and never has been humankind's enemy. Humanity, through fear and misunderstanding, has often interpreted death as a sinister and awesome opponent of life. The law of death that operates in all of nature keeps a balance in nature. This law benefits all of the creation.

Can you imagine what it would be like if all people since

³¹Jn. 1:17, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

³²1 Cor. 15:55-57, KJV.

the beginning of the human family were still living on the earth in their earthly bodies? It is the physical part of a human being which must return to the earth so that others may have their time in the drama of life. A human being in his/her spiritual nature is eternal and indestructible.

The following is the Aramaic translation of the above passage of Scripture:

Death, where is your sting? Sheol, where is your victory?
the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God who has given to us the victory
through our Lord Jesus the Messiah.³³

In his pastoral letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains why death has a sting and why *sheol*³⁴ has a victory over humankind. According to Paul's interpretation, humans became "sin conscious" when Moses gave the law. The law reinforced the apparent power of sin by declaring what was right or wrong, clean or unclean. The result was that people often felt powerless over sin, sickness and death.

However, Jesus through his own death and resurrection destroyed the "sting" of death—sin. Through the teaching of Jesus we learn that sin (error, missing the mark) is forgivable. We also learn that, as individuals, we have power over any of our mistakes (sins).

To Semites the cross represented death — the end. But the cross of Jesus represents new life. It shows that humankind, through embodying a consciousness of the Messiah-Christ, has authority over sin, sickness, and death.

Jesus' dramatic, triumphant resurrection from the dark and dreaded grave was not an attempt to prove a religious

³³1 Cor. 15:55-57, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

³⁴*Sheol* — a place where, according to the belief of that time, departed souls went to rest.

doctrine of eternal life. It was to uncover a long-held secret of nature—that no life ever comes to an end. The resurrection clearly reveals that life is spiritual in its essence and, therefore, eternal and not ephemeral.

Again, the apostle Paul assures his disciple Timothy: "And is now made manifest by the appearance of our Savior Jesus the Messiah, who has abolished death and has revealed life and immortality through the joyful message."³⁵ Jesus destroyed the *fear* of death, not the process of death itself. It is the law of life that brings us into this world and it is the same law of life that carries us out.

It is possible to say that birth and death are the opposite extremes of the same rod. It is the power of death and decay that makes a freshly planted seed give birth to new life. The law of death causes life to continue and multiply.

During the last Passover meal that Jesus and his apostles shared, he encouraged them. They were very depressed, gloomy, and fearful because of the bleak and foreboding future they were facing. Their hope of a political restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the all-conquering militant Messiah was fading away. Now the apostles' hearts were heavy with the thoughts of their beloved teacher's death.

Jesus said to them: "I will not leave you bereaved, I will come to you after a little while. And the world will not see me, but you will see me; because I live, you shall live also. In that day you will know that I am with my Father and you are with me, and I am with you."³⁶ After the crucifixion and the resurrection of their master, Jesus appeared to them and said: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world." Jesus would always reveal himself to his disciples not only for the apostolic age but for the ages to come. "He who has my

³⁵2 Tim. 1:10, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

³⁶Jn. 14:18-20, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

commandments with him and obeys them is the one who loves me; he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love and *reveal* myself to him."³⁷

³⁷Jn. 14:21, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation. For a fuller explanation of the resurrection of Jesus, see the next chapter, *Here and There in Scripture*, "The Death and Resurrection of Jesus," pp. 219–21.

CHAPTER 10

Here and There in Scripture

HEAVENLY TREASURES

Do not put aside for yourselves treasures buried in the ground, a place where moth and rust destroy; and where thieves break through and steal. But put aside for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy; and where thieves do not break through and steal. For where your treasure is, there also is your heart.¹

In the ancient Near East people buried their gold, silver coins, and other valuables in the ground to keep them safe from bandits. They also hid expensive clothing and perishable goods in secret places constructed in the walls of their homes. Although a thief might not have stolen some of these things, rust, moths, and other insects would often destroy them.

Banks and other places for the safe keeping of valuables or money were unknown. People who possessed such things usually buried them secretly at night. But, of course, there were others who searched for these hidden treasures. Usually the one who had secretly buried his valuables constantly worried that someone might discover them. Therefore, the owner's heart and mind, his thoughts and energies were focused on his "buried" treasure. "For where your treasure is, there also is your heart."

Jesus recommended putting aside treasures "in heaven," where robbers could not steal and moths could not destroy them. Jesus uses the term "heaven" metaphorically. Biblical authors frequently employ the word "heaven" to show something

¹Mt. 6:19–21, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

permanent and not fleeting.

"Treasures in heaven" are good works which are real and eternal, not ephemeral. These spiritual treasures continue from one generation to another, benefitting their owners as well as the community. Material things come and go; sometimes they are abundant and sometimes scarce.

Jesus did not discourage the idea of savings, nor did he downplay material things. But, he did recognize that material things alone cannot comprehensively provide the full, genuine comfort, joy, and happiness an individual needs to live well. He encouraged good works which are truly "treasures in heaven" for everyone.

A SIMPLE EYE

The light of the body is the eye; if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!²

According to the King James Version of Matthew's gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples and followers to have a "single eye." What does a "single eye" mean? Does the Aramaic gospel of Matthew offer a variant translation?

New Testament scholars conjecture all kinds of interpretations. Souter, a Greek biblical authority, says that the Greek word *hapious*, translated here as "single," means "directing the eye to one definite object." He believes it is a symbolic expression for singleness of purpose. Some interpreters suggest that the word implies "generosity," while others propose its meaning as an eye that is trustful and entirely

²Mt. 6:22-23, KJV.

free from envy.

Let us look into the Aramaic New Testament and see what it says.

The lamp of the body is the eye; if, then, your eye is simple, your entire body is also lighted. But, if your eye is bad, your entire body will be dark. If, then, the light which is in you is dark, how much more will be your darkness!³

The Aramaic word *peshitta* means "simple," "pure," "normal," and "original." Jesus used the word *peshitta* to describe the eye—the "simple eye." This expression means an individual who has no evil intention, a person whose motive, intent, and purpose are pure. When the eye is simple, the body is full of light. But, if the eye is "bad" (devious, crafty, or has evil intentions) then the body is full of darkness.

Interestingly, in modern Aramaic, the Assyrians and Chaldeans of today say that a person with ulterior motives and who is crafty and devious has "salty eyes." This idiom "salty eyes" is equal to our English idiom "shifty eyes."

The saying "If, then, the light which is in you is dark, how much more will be your darkness" also has a special meaning in Aramaic. It signifies that if a shifty person calls the crooked things he does "good," how much worse, then, are the things that he calls "bad."

THE MAGI AND THE GUIDING STAR

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, magi came from the East to Jerusalem, and they were asking: Where is the King of the Jews who has been born? Because we have seen his star in the East, and we have come to pay homage to him. . . . Now when

³Mt. 6:22-23, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

they heard from the King, they went away; and behold the very star which they had seen in the East was going before them until it came and stood over where the little boy was. Then when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with tremendous joy! And when they entered the house and saw the little boy with Mary, his mother, they fell down and knelt before him; and they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense."⁴

The first and second chapters of Matthew's gospel serve as a foreword to his book. Most New Testament scholars propose that the infancy narrative (Chapters One and Two) made its appearance on a separate scroll. This scroll was not a part of the early, original gospel of Matthew. Regardless, it is now a part of the so-called *sacred life history* of the Nazarene Jesus who became the Messiah (Christ).

Magoosheh is the Aramaic word for "magi." Its root derives from the Babylonian and Persian word *magno*, meaning "receptive." This is the same root from which our words magnetic and magic originate.

Who were the magi? They were Chaldean priests who were schooled in the art of magic and enchantments. These men studied the stars from an astrological as well as astronomical point of view. They were also known as soothsayers, fire and sun worshipers, and fortune tellers.

Although in his gospel Matthew does not tell us the number of magi, nor that they were kings, later Christian tradition informs us that they were three kings.⁵ The idea of *three* wise men is an assumption stemming from the three gifts presented to the infant Jesus. Early Near Eastern tradition says that there were twelve magi.

Near Easterners frequently refer to a relationship between individuals and the stars of heaven. For instance,

⁴Mt. 2:1-2, 9-11, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

⁵The idea that the magi were kings comes from Ps. 72:10 and Isa. 49:7.

many Eastern people believe that everyone has a special star in the heavens that holds the secret of his/her destiny. There are those known as "star-gazers," who can locate anyone's personal star and then tell their fortune.

When a man or woman is very personable, Easterners remark: "His/her star is attractive." Moreover, when two individuals love each other, people say: "Their stars are in harmony." Also, when unfavorable circumstances arise, they assert: "Their stars have moved in a sphere of misfortune."

For almost a thousand years Near Eastern people were expecting a world-deliverer to appear. This one would bring in an age of great universal peace. Persian and Babylonian peoples were expecting a great leader to arise. Therefore when the magi, who were Chaldean priests who studied the stars, noted the sudden appearance of a special star, they assumed it was heralding the long-awaited event. (Such an assumption by the priests would not have been uncommon. Ancient writings inform us that a special star appeared at the birth of Alexander the Great.)

Not only did the stars have special meaning, but they also served as a compass by which to navigate, and the magi used this special star for that purpose. "The very star which they had seen in the East was going before them" simply means that the star guided the magi. The star itself was not literally moving.

Dr. Abraham M. Rihbany tells us that:

... to the Oriental mind the "hosts of heaven" [stars] are no mere masses of dust, but the agencies of the Creator's might and love. So the narrative of the Nativity in our gospel sublimates the beliefs of the Orientals about God's purpose in those lights of the firmament, by making the guide of the Wise Men to the birthplace of the Prince of Peace a great star, whose pure and serene light symbolized the peace and holiness which, in the "fullness of time," his

kingdom shall bring upon the earth.⁶

SOUL AND SPIRIT

Now may he, the God of peace, sanctify you completely, every one of you; and may your entire spirit and soul and body be kept faultless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah.⁷

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul perceived humans as trinitarian beings: spirit, soul, and body. Most of us understand the difference between body and soul, or body and spirit. But what is the difference between soul and spirit?

Biblical authors use the terms "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably throughout various books of sacred Scripture. This interchange of terms makes it difficult for us to comprehend the difference between "soul" and "spirit." Is there an answer to our problem?

For understanding the difference between "soul" and "spirit," I use a simple illustration. (However, this illustration is not an explanation of the biblical usage of these terms.) Spirit is the finest essence in the universe. It is intangible and invisible. Soul is still a fine essence but it is denser than spirit. We can feel "soul" through our emotions. Physical form, body, is the densest manifestation of the soul-spirit essence.

What I believe happens is this: spirit transmutes itself into soul, and soul transmutes itself into physical form. Spirit, soul, and body remain differentiated, but are one, which is consistent with the ancient biblical idea that viewed a human being as a total unity, that is, as a spirit-soul-body manifestation.

To further illustrate this differentiation between spirit,

⁶Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, "The Star," pp. 36–37.

⁷1 Thes. 5:23, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

soul, and body, we may compare them to the different forms of water. The combination of hydrogen and oxygen is a chemical compound we call water (two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen). Ice is the most structured, least free-flowing form of this compound, and it may be compared to the physical body. When ice melts, it becomes liquid or free-flowing water, which may be compared to the soul.

If we heat water sufficiently, it turns into a vapor or steam. The vapor still retains its original chemical composition, though it is not restricted in the ways that water is. This final stage may be compared to the finest essence of our beings—spirit.

Therefore, by comparison, I have described the manifestation of a human being in degrees. The body is fine; the soul is finer; and the spirit is the finest. All three make up one being. We must not take the above ideas and illustration as theological dogma. They are simply my attempt to answer questions people continually ask at my lectures.

THE MEANING OF SOUL

Biblical scholars use four basic languages in the study of "soul" — Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In Hebrew the word for "soul" is *nephesh*, in Aramaic it is *naphsha* (pronounced *nowsha*). The Greek term for "soul" is *psyche*. (*Psyche* and another Greek word, *logos*, are the basis for our English word "psychology." It means the telling or the spoken word of the soul. And what is most interesting is that the word *psyche* also means "butterfly.") In Latin *anima* means "soul" and is in the feminine aspect of soul. *Animus* means "spirit," but it also depicts the soul on the masculine side.

Nephesh and *naphsha* have more meaning than just "soul." Both these words primarily signify "being." They also mean "self," "life," "person," "individual, and "breath."

Linguistically, *nephesh* has to do with air, particularly with the living air of the head as the center of generative vitality. We can see this very clearly in the book of Genesis: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul [being]."⁸

On a phenomenal level, *nephesh* or *naphsha* has to do with breath or with any vaporous substance such as mist, dew, or heavy, cool vapor. The scene pictured for us in Genesis — in which God blew into the nostrils of His creature, giving animation and soul to the red-clay figure—was a very sensual depiction of the creation of soul (being). (In the ancient Near East, midwives usually blew into the newly born babe's nostrils. God here is taking the role of a midwife.) There is much scientific and esoteric meaning to this verse, though it goes beyond the scope of this brief explanation.

EZEKIEL AND THE SOUL

"Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die."⁹ The translator of this verse used the English word "soul" for the Aramaic and Hebrew words *nephesh* and *naphsha*. If we interpret this verse literally, we think it means that the soul dies if it sins. But, does Ezekiel refer to the death of the soul, or does he refer to something else? Can the soul die? If it can, does this imply that the soul is not immortal?

Let us look into another translation of this scriptural passage and several verses that precede this one. Ezekiel says: "The word of the Lord came to me saying, O human being, why

⁸Gen. 2:7, KJV.

⁹Ezk. 18:4, KJV.

do you use this proverb in the land of Israel which says, Parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall never be used again in Israel. Because all lives (*naphsha*) are mine; the father's life (*naphsha*) is mine; and the life (*naphsha*) of the son also is mine; the person (*naphsha*) who sins shall die."¹⁰ This translation would also hold true for the Hebrew text of Ezekiel.

"Parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" is an Eastern proverb. It means that children can pay for the sins or crimes of their parents. In Israel children would receive the punishment that their parents deserved. God alone had the power to change Israel's old law and belief in that form of retribution. (See the book of Joshua, 7:1-25.)

However, the prophet saw a new day coming in Israel when the old law of punishing children for the deeds of their parents would end. Now we can understand the meaning of the phrase: "the soul [individual or person] that sinneth shall die." The one who committed the wrong [crime or sin] would die and no one else.

NEW TESTAMENT AND SOUL

Let us consider one of Jesus' teachings from Matthew's gospel. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or, what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"¹¹

Keeping in mind that the Semitic word for soul also means "self" and "life," let us re-examine Jesus' teaching from original Aramaic texts. Beginning with verse 24, the passage

¹⁰Ezk. 18:1-4, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

¹¹Mt. 16:26, KJV.

reads: "Now then Jesus said to his disciples, Anyone who wishes to follow me, let him deny his life [*naphsha*], and take up his cross and follow me. Because anyone who wants to save his life [*naphsha*] shall lose it; and anyone who loses his life [*naphsha*] for my sake shall find it. For how may an individual benefit if he gains the entire world but loses his life [*naphsha*]? Or what may an individual give in exchange for his life [*naphsha*]?¹²

The *naphsha* is the life force of a human being. It is what animates an individual. It is the seat of desire, love, and imagination. Therefore the question Jesus put to his disciples touched the very center and core of their being.

His disciples knew that their lives were in danger because their Master's teachings were controversial. Others believed Jesus' teachings were heretical. His disciples would have to meet the challenge (pick up the cross) and perhaps lose their lives. Nevertheless, by meeting the challenge they would find greater life.

Soul is not a nebulous ethereal part of each of us; it is the very center from which we live. What, then, would we give in exchange for our very "selves" (souls—*naphsha*), our own lives? How could we benefit if we gained great material possession but lost connection with the depth of our own being — life force? The challenge of Jesus' teachings helps us to discover and value our authentic selves.

SPIRIT

"Spirit" in Hebrew is *ruach* and in Aramaic, *ruha*. The Semitic root *ruh* means "to breathe" or "to blow." "Spirit," *ruach* or *ruha* in Semitic tongues, has many meanings. It means "Holy Spirit," "breath," "wind," "animated life," "vapor," "pride,"

¹²Mt. 16:24–26, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

"temper," "inclination," "rheumatism," and has many connotations.

When it is a verb, it signifies "to enlarge," "to widen," "to relieve," "to expand," or "to recover from illness." There are also many Semitic idiomatic usages of this word. Let us recall what was said earlier in this commentary: "Biblical authors use the terms 'soul' and 'spirit' interchangeably throughout various books of sacred Scripture. This interchange of terms makes it difficult for us to comprehend the differences between 'soul' and 'spirit'."

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God is Spirit.¹³ God's essence is Spirit. But what is God? The term "God" in Aramaic is defined as "the Self-Existent One—*ithea*." We also may refer to God as the efficacious Presence or Principle. It is from this self-existent principle that all forms of life flow. Thus the root of everything that one sees is Spirit. A human being's essence is also Spirit but manifests itself as soul-body.

However, when Jesus made this statement to the Samaritan woman, she was not thinking of a "Self-Existent Being." She did not think in metaphysical terms. She thought in terms of a localized deity whom the people worshiped on the mountain in Samaria and not in the temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus corrected this misunderstanding when he told her that God is Spirit. We cannot localize or headquarter God anywhere in particular. God is the Eternal Spirit. And Spirit is enduring, unchangeable, transcendent, and yet immanent. God, as Spirit, is everywhere, an all-pervading presence, and all-inclusive.

When Assyrians refer to a dynamic speaker who has much charisma, they say that person has *ruha*. This means that the speaker's presence and speech are powerful, brilliant, and exceedingly persuasive. They also use the word *ruha* to describe

¹³See Jn. 4:24.

anyone who has a hot (uncontrollable) temper.

"And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him."¹⁴

The Aramaic phrase *ruha tamtha* means "an unclean spirit"—that is, a person who is mentally unbalanced and exhibits an uncontrollable temper. Any habit or tendency that is harmful, is called by Easterners "unclean." In the East, a mentally unbalanced individual may rebuke a prince or king without offending him or bringing punishment upon himself. Evidently this is what took place in the synagogue while Jesus spoke.

When the unbalanced person saw Jesus, he became enraged and could not control his anger toward him. He had overheard the accusations made against the teacher of Galilee from others. Religious leaders thought Jesus dangerous and a threat to their faith because he had refuted the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus rebuked the insane man, calmed him down, and healed him.

Semites used the term *ruha* to suggest all kinds of physical illnesses, as well as emotional and mental disorders. On another occasion Jesus cast out (healed) seven unclean spirits from Mary of Magdala. The seven devils implied seven crazy thoughts, or bad habits. From that time on, Mary became a devoted follower of Jesus of Nazareth.

"Spirit" also means "radiation," "influence," "vibration," "inspiration." The term "evil spirit" can signify "an evil individual," "a bad demeanor," or "jealousy." In the book of 1

¹⁴Mk. 1:23-25, KJV.

Samuel 18:10–11, it says that an "evil spirit" from God came upon Saul. David played the lyre to soothe King Saul when he fell into a depressed mood. But often the king would rage and throw a javelin at David. We have a problem here. Did God literally send an "evil spirit" upon Saul? In our modern thinking, we know that God does not send "evil spirits" upon anyone. In biblical days, people attributed all happenings to their God or gods.

Obviously King Saul was jealous of David, for he knew the prophet Samuel had secretly anointed David to be the next king. This means that Saul's dynasty would end. David would rival Saul's sons, so the king decided to kill David.

The lesson we learn is clear. We humans often like to blame God, some unseen evil force, or others for the things that may happen to us. But the truth is, we create "evil spirits" — jealousies. We are responsible for our own reactions to whatever adverse circumstances may come our way.

BUTTER AND HONEY

Butter and honey shall he [Emmanuel] eat that he may know to refuse evil, and choose good.¹⁵

We can better understand the cultural context of this passage when we consider that Near Eastern authors often use "butter and honey" symbolically to represent peace, harmony, meekness, and prosperity. For example, biblical writers called Palestine "the land of milk [butter] and honey." This means that Palestine was to be a land of peace and prosperity.

In the old days, the milk that wealthy Easterners drank came primarily from sheep. They also used butter made from the milk of sheep. They very seldom used cow's milk for

¹⁵Isa. 7:15, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

drinking or for butter. The poor were the ones who used cow's milk and by-products.

Sheep are gentle animals and trustingly allow shepherds to guide and feed them. They never resist their enemy, nor do they protest when the shepherd takes them to the slaughter. Sheep-raising people are famous for their hospitality, sincerity, and reverence for God.

In the Bible, we read of many great prophets who had been engaged in raising sheep when God called them to become prophets. For these reasons, in Near Eastern culture, sheep symbolized meekness. Easterners came to associate drinking milk from sheep with being meek and gentle.

Another association common with Semites relates to the way nature makes honey. To produce honey, bees gather nectar from flowers, and since the various colors of flowers were symbolic for Easterners, honey came to represent harmony and prosperity. (The various colors of flowers to Easterners meant peace, wisdom, harmony, and prosperity.)

Now we can fully grasp the idea of the saying of Isaiah: "Butter and honey shall he eat that he may *know* to refuse evil, and choose good." It also suggests that when spiritual understanding reigns in the hearts of humanity, humankind will eat "butter and honey." Humanity will live in peace and prosperity. Nations will become harmless, and instruments of war will be no more.

SINCERE HUMILITY

And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.¹⁶

¹⁶1 Cor. 2:3-4, KJV.

Wise and learned men of the Near East do not usually let people know they are knowledgeable. It is for good reason that they conceal their wisdom. If people were to discover a man of great learning among them, they would most likely ply him with an unending stream of difficult and controversial questions. These questions would, in turn, lead to arguments, verbal attacks, division, and strife.

Wise teachers shun publicity. They allow people to discern for themselves what manner of person is among them. A sincere leader will behave humbly and be slow to give answers. He often will feign ignorance. As we read in the Aramaic text: "Let no one deceive himself. Anyone among you who thinks he is wise in this world, let him become a fool so that he may become wise."¹⁷

While among the Corinthians, Paul assumed the role of wise teacher. We see this clearly in the Aramaic translation: "And I was with you with much reverence and with shaking. Now my speech and my preaching were not with alluring words of wisdom, but in demonstration of Spirit and power."¹⁸

Paul displayed no weakness or fear when speaking before the people of Corinth. He conducted himself with modesty and taught with reverence. He concealed his astute knowledge of Jewish law and traditions of the elders, because he wanted to teach the *simple* words of Christ. He wanted to manifest the power of the Spirit evidenced in those words.

Jesus' teachings are not based on calculated wisdom and complicated, controversial interpretations of Scripture. His gospel is a simple, direct faith in the power of love, compassion, and meekness. This new way could never find explanation through clever use of words, theological debates, or signs and wonders. It manifests only through humility and the power of

¹⁷1 Cor. 3:18, Aramaic Peshitta text, Lamsa translation.

¹⁸1 Cor. 2:3–4, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

God. Faith, which relies on the wisdom and power of God, is eternal and steadfast.

COMPASSION

It was late afternoon. The day had been very hot, but cool dry air now began to sweep across the lake of Galilee, refreshing the eager multitudes. They had come to hear Jesus teach on the mountainside. Jesus stood up, focused his attention, and said in Aramaic, *toowayhon lamrahmaneh: dalayhon nehwon rahmeh*, "Delighted are the compassionate, for compassion shall return to them!"¹⁹

Toowayhon usually translates as "blessed." However, the word for "blessed" in Semitic languages is *barekh*. This word *toowayhon* comes from the root *toob* or *toow*, and means the best that a person or place has. It also means "happy," "content," "blissful," "delighted," "fortunate." "Delighted" suggests great happiness, prosperity and abundant goodness.

Its Hebrew equivalent, *ashre*, expresses the same idea. All the psalms that begin with "blessed" use the Hebrew term *ashre*, which means "happy" and "fortunate." So we can see that both terms are identical.

M'rahmaneh refers to the merciful and compassionate. It comes from the root *rhm*, meaning "to love," "delight in," "to be kind," "to be friendly." The compassionate are those who do deeds of mercy and charitable acts. Jesus taught practical compassion. Pious Easterners believe that charitable and loving acts which spring from a compassionate heart are God in action.

Eastern people are famous for their hospitality, not only in helping their neighbors, but also in extending acts of kindness to strangers and even to their enemies who may be in need.

¹⁹Mt. 5:7, Aramaic Peshitta text, Errico translation.

There is a saying among the people: "Today we have plenty but no one knows what tomorrow will bring. The same hand that renders help today may be in need of assistance tomorrow. No one can live to himself."

They recognize an unwritten social law. To those who are compassionate, compassion will return. To those who practice kind deeds, kindness will return. And those who are charitable will not lack.

It is easy to understand why Jesus continued to emphasize the practice of compassion as a spiritual law and principle of God's heavenly kingdom. However, the Aramaic term *rahma*, signifying "mercy" or "compassion," is very interesting and fascinating because it has so many other unique meanings.

Rahma also means "love," "affection," "friend," "kindness," "tender-hearted." Moreover, it refers to certain internal organs of the human body such as the "womb," "testicles," and "bladder." In the plural form *rahmeh* signifies "bowels."

We often hear this famous verse of scripture: "You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*."²⁰ The Aramaic Peshitta text in both Leviticus and Matthew uses the word *rahma* for "love." However, the only difference is that it is in the verbal form, *rham*, and not the noun *rahma*.

Moses' exhortation to "love your neighbor as yourself," repeated by Jesus, does not imply sentimentality. The word carries the connotation of being warm, kindly, amicable—that is, "to be well-disposed toward." Jesus continually emphasized what his religion had stressed centuries before his time. He affirmed the highest ideals in everyone so that the human family might practice peace and reconciliation.

Compassionate love nourishes and encourages the finest in human beings and creates a healthy emotional environment.

²⁰Lev. 19:18, Mt. 22:39, KJV.

But notice the last part of the phrase: "love your neighbor as yourself." "Yourself" is the word *naphsha* and it also signifies "your life," "being," or "soul." In other words, the compassionate care and love that one has for his or her own actual self (soul) is the base for the practice of love (compassion) toward one's neighbor. Self-compassion, therefore, is very important.

What is compassion? Compassion is a state of being in which kindness holds sway and in which a state of *self-grace* establishes itself within the individual. Dr. T. I. Rubin, a noted psychiatrist, says:

Compassion is any and all thoughts, feelings, moods, insights and actions that serve the interest of actual self. These include all functions that protect, sustain, enhance actual self. These also include all functions which in any way diminish and destroy self-hate and which result in increased self-acceptance leading to greater self-esteem. Compassion is enhanced wherever and whenever consciousness displaces repression and unconsciousness and reality replaces unreality. . . . The stuff of humanity requires emotional nourishment and this is born of the struggle to be compassionate with ourselves against all inner and outside forces that dictate otherwise.²¹

Without doubt, when any individual knows a deep inner compassion within himself or herself, the practice of compassionate love for others is enhanced. This practice does not just stem from a religious regulation for proper human behavior, but comes from a viable self-motivated state of grace which benefits one's own being and others. We affirm the biblical claim that humans are the "image and likeness of God" when we, as individuals, come to know the *rahma*, compassion that is ours through natural birthright. Genuine compassion

²¹Theodore Isaac Rubin, M.D. *Compassion and Self-Hate, An Alternative to Despair*, "Compassion in process," pp. 139-40.

and spirituality are nothing more than a human being's behaving humanely.

JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Jesus' death was the key to open the door into liberty, not only for his apostles and immediate followers, but for all humanity. His death transcended all physical limitations and extended his spiritual influence throughout the world. The late Near Eastern scholar and Aramaic Bible translator Dr. George M. Lamsa explained Jesus' death in poetic, metaphoric language as follows:

A glass of water placed in the Sahara contains all the qualities of water, but it is isolated. Ships cannot sail over this small amount of water nor can fish live and swim in it. The moment this water evaporates it becomes an integral part of all water in the air and the ocean. Such is it with man who is alive physically but is isolated spiritually until he comes in contact with other spirits. This is how Jesus thought of his death. It was an ending of his physical part, but a larger beginning of his spiritual personality, which was to break through all barriers of isolation and win for him a following of loyal souls from every country and century forevermore. This is what brought him to Jerusalem. His death was the fulfillment of his destiny.²²

New Testament experts usually interpret gospel writings concerning Jesus' victory over death, his resurrection from the tomb, and his ascension into heaven as narratives of faith and theological compositions. Other scholars believe it is legend. Again, some authorities claim that the disciples were experiencing visions of their resurrected Master and Teacher.

²²George M. Lamsa, *My Neighbor Jesus*, "On the Cross," p 139.

We must also consider the influence Jesus exerted upon his disciples while he was still with them. There is no doubt that his impression upon the disciples went deeper than they were conscious of. So powerful was this impression upon them that it could not be effaced from their hearts and souls.

Jesus' physical presence only half revealed the ultimate meaning of the supreme ethical ideals that he embodied. Human experience teaches that we never fully spiritually possess the embodiments of excellence in those whom we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands until they are no longer with us. What the physical presence only partly suggests, the spiritual presence fully reveals.

The loss of a beloved in whom the highest ideals were embodied stirs and illumines the memory. It also gives free and stronger wings to the soul's most powerful faculty, the imagination. However, we must not think of the imagination as merely a faculty for fanciful flights or absurdities. It is the imagination that has the power to connect us with the spiritual genius of our humanity.

The answer to understanding the resurrection of Jesus lies with the apostles and disciples themselves. After all, they were the ones who reported the astounding event. Before Jesus' death, the disciples did not fully grasp the depth and meaning of his mission and teaching. They had dreams of a messianic kingdom in which they and their lord would rule the nations.

But when the crucifixion took place, all their dreams and political aspirations shattered. Their broken hopes and the painful loss of their teacher were so great that they soon returned to their old occupations. Nevertheless, Jesus' death began to bring about deep mental and emotional changes within the consciousness of his disciples.

His death began to liberate and expand their reasoning and visionary powers. Because of this devastating loss, the disciples would soon experience visions of a resurrected teacher.

They now could transcend their former reasoning and begin to perceive things spiritually.

When this transformation started to take effect within their souls, Jesus, as a living presence, could appear to them in visions and dreams. They saw their lord and teacher as the glorified Messiah. He was with them and would infuse them with power and courage.

This spiritual influence was so powerful and gripping that the disciples knew Jesus had conquered death. So profound was their experience that they were willing to face death and martyrdom. The Semitic Aramaic expression *kam leh*, "He is risen," means "He has succeeded," "He has come through," or "He has achieved his purpose in life." The risen Messiah-Christ, in his spiritual nature, belongs to the entire human family in every generation and in every age.

I believe the human Jesus was a simple man. His source was God and his religion was the faith of Israel. His spiritual insight continues to ignite the hearts and souls of men, women, and children the world over.

CONCLUSION

In this volume we have covered many subjects. But we have *caught* only a small glimpse of the powerful light that shines from Aramaic, the language of Jesus. In the volumes that are to follow, we will uncover even more precious treasures through the eyes of the Near East. And we shall unlock many new doors with the Seven Keys. Until then: *shlamay hubey dalaha awoon: laalam almeen amen*. Peace and love from God our Father forever and ever. Amen.

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and television appearances.

Under the auspices of the Noohra Foundation, Dr. Errico continues to lecture for colleges, civic groups and churches of various denominations in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Europe.

For a complimentary catalog of Aramaic Bible translations, books, audio and video cassettes, and a brochure of classes, retreats and seminars, or for any other inquiries, write or call the Noohra Foundation. Those interested in scheduling Dr. Errico for a personal appearance may also contact:

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In addition to *Let There Be Light*, the Noohra Foundation is pleased to offer the following books by Dr. Rocco A. Errico.

ARAMAIC NEW TESTAMENT SERIES, VOLUMES 1 – 3

(Dr. George M. Lamsa, Co-Author)

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These inimitable commentaries act as a Near Eastern guide, taking you through the heart of the gospels, illuminating difficult and puzzling passages and offering unparalleled insight into the character and behavior of Near Eastern Semites. These volumes are more than just a revision of Dr. Lamsa's commentaries, *Gospel Light* and *More Light on the Gospels*. Dr. Errico has edited, expanded and annotated these previous works and added unpublished material that the two of them had drafted just before Dr. Lamsa died in 1975. Dr. Errico completed the comments that they had only outlined and also included information derived from his continual research in Aramaic word meanings and Near Eastern Semitic Studies.

AND THERE WAS LIGHT

Like its predecessor *Let There Be Light*, this book takes us through the heart of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament by working with Aramaic—the language spoken by the Patriarchs, Jesus, his apostles and their contemporaries. Once more, Dr. Errico unlocks puzzling passages with the Seven Keys. Suddenly the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, becomes clearer and more relevant for Western readers. The teaching ministry and parables of Jesus come alive as you've never read before.

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In this bold new book, Dr. Errico builds a bridge between our Western ways of understanding and the Middle Eastern social realities that are embedded in the Bible. He helps us to *see the Bible through Semitic, Aramaic eyes*—in its original language. Bypassing doctrinal creeds and rigid interpretations, he presents a broader understanding of Scripture without the restrictions of literal explanations. The meanings of the Bible's key stories were always simple and uncomplicated.

Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys opens the door to the ancient Aramaic world from which the Bible emerged. Here are a few examples of The Seven Keys:

1st Key—*The Aramaic Language*: According to the Aramaic text, Jesus' words on the cross were, "O God! To what a purpose you have kept me, for this was my destiny!"

2nd Key—*Idioms*: To "deliver unto Satan" means "to let the individual stew in his own juices or misdeeds and to suffer their consequences."

3rd Key—*Mysticism*: Was Jonah really swallowed by a great whale? No, this was a vision in which the fish symbolizes trouble or sorrow.

4th Key—*Culture*: "Give us our daily bread" refers to understanding, truth, spiritual nourishment, and the "Bread" of eternal life.

5th Key—*Psychology*: When Jesus said "Love your enemy" he didn't mean ardent sentimentality but a deep concern and warm care that might win over an enemy.

6th Key—*Symbolism*: Did God curse Eve in the Garden of Eden and malign the female gender forever? Absolutely not, because *both* Adam and Eve transgressed God's command and both sexes equally share the responsibility.

7th Key—*Amplification*: Was Rebekah the mother of *thousands of millions*? Not really, because Semitic writers often amplified exaggerated their descriptions for poetic effect.

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